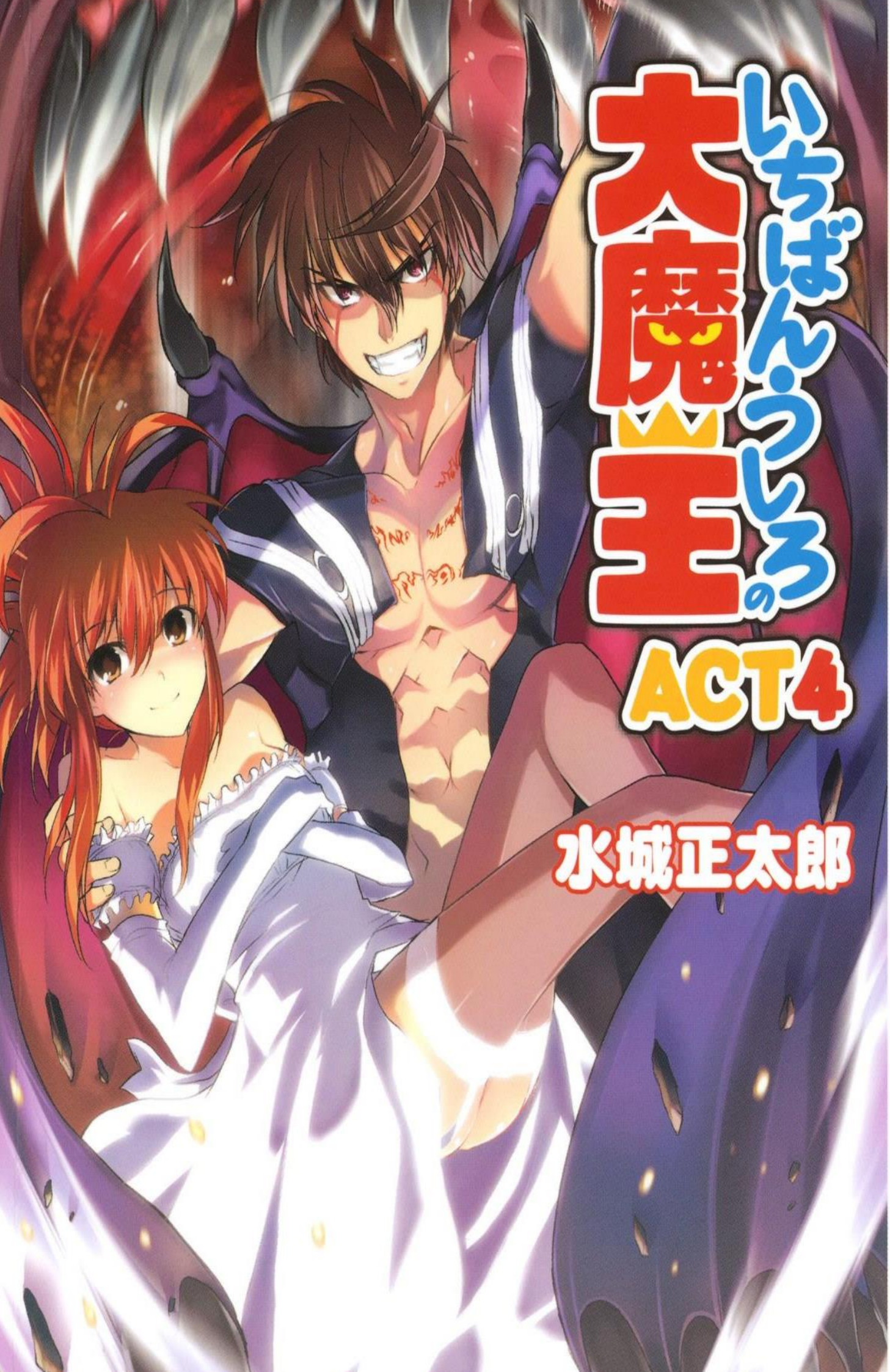

み01-02-04

水城正太郎 いちばんうしろの大魔王ACT4

HJ文庫
HOBBY JAPAN

いちばんうしろの
大魔王
ACT4

阿九斗様！
そんな忌まわしい力まで
使おうというのか！

僕は、
神を……殺す。

待っていた！
この時を待っていたぞ、主よ！

登場人物紹介

ころね

阿九斗の監視と護衛を行なう人造人間。ポシェットから秘密な道具を取り出し使用する。

曽我(そが)けーな

落ちこぼれな天然少女。阿九斗に懐いている。物語の鍵を握る人物？

紗伊阿九斗(さいあくと)

将来「魔王」になると予言された「善良な」主人公。膨大な魔力を有するが融通が利かない。

学院長(がくいんちょう)

コンスタン魔術学院の学院長。謎多き老人。魔王が起こした前大戦の経験者。

江藤不二子（えとうふじこ）
阿九斗に忠誠を誓った黒魔術師にして薬物使い。阿九斗たちの先輩で女子寮長を勤める。
服部絢子（はっとりじゅんこ）
阿九斗のことが気になる一途で純情なクラス委員長。伊賀出身の忍者娘。
リリィ白石（しらいし）
コンスタン魔術学院生徒会長。帽子がトレードマーク。阿九斗と魔王の件に関して独自路線を歩む。
三輪寛（みわひろし）
阿九斗の弟分を名乗るトラブルメイカー。伝説の勇者という顔も持つ。

Prologue

Even at a young age, Sai Akuto had felt somehow out of sync with the world.

He was an orphan. That alone had a good chance of giving him a personality that did not adapt to his surroundings well, but with Akuto, it came from a more fundamental aspect of his personality.

A gentleman had once visited the orphanage he lived in. The gentleman's appearance was more than enough to know he came from an excellent family and was financially wealthy, but he showed no hint of being prideful about it. His speech made it abundantly clear that he had a personality overflowing with kindness and it seemed that donating money for orphans was a natural thing for him.

"I just so happened to be passing by when I learned this is an orphanage. I could hardly ignore it. If it is not a bother, I would like to make a donation."

Akuto was the one receiving the gentleman who smiled and removed his hat. Akuto was a precocious child who was known for being too clever for his age, so the teachers would let him receive any visitors when they were busy.

"Thank you very much, mister. We truly thank you. I will call for someone who can handle that for you, so please wait here a moment."

Akuto was not simply saying what he had been taught to say. His words of thanks were his own. The gentleman seemed incredibly moved to see someone as young as Akuto speaking so smoothly.

"This is a surprise. What a well-mannered child. How about I hand the donation to you? You can then pass it on to whoever is in charge."

The gentleman must have prepared his donation before knocking on the orphanage door because he pulled a white envelope out of his inner coat pocket and handed it to Akuto. The envelope was heavy, so Akuto could tell it had a large sum of money inside. When the gentleman saw Akuto's look of surprise, he smiled kindly and nodded.

"Thank you very much. We cannot give you anything in return, but at least give everyone the opportunity to thank you directly. If you can come in and wait, I will call for everyone," said Akuto as he bowed deeply.

"No, that is not necessary. I have merely done what is completely natural for a follower of the god Ko Ro. Do not thank me; thank my god."

With that humble comment, the gentleman put on his hat and began to leave.

“Please wait. I would rather thank you than your god,” said Akuto.

The gentleman stopped and stroked the edge of his hat with a gentle expression.

“You must not. I have done nothing. This is the benevolence of god. It was all thanks to my god leading me to this place.”

Those words were not an attempt to hide his embarrassment. The gentleman’s tone of voice made it clear they were rooted in his deep piety.

If he had been speaking to a normal child, this would have ended as nothing but a good memory for the orphanage.

However, he was speaking with Akuto.

“The gods are nothing but systems, so thanking them would change your kindness into nothing but selfishness. That is why I cannot thank your god. I wish to simply thank your kindness,” said Akuto.

He truly was too clever for his age.

It was true that the gods of this age were nothing more than control systems that recorded people’s actions in order to provide social services.

However, since everyone had their everyday actions recorded, they were required to take actions in accordance with what was defined as “correct” in order to be given a better life. This had led to a situation where even very educated people fell into blind faith or religious zeal. It may have been that piety could not be controlled by reason, but Akuto did not fully understand that.

“Do not be so rude! God will punish you for this! The gods exist and have wills of their own, so it is only natural to thank and fear them! And that creates solidarity between believers. Now apologize to god!”

The gentleman approached Akuto while filled with emotion.

Akuto could not see how the gentleman’s thinking made any sense whatsoever.

“I cannot apologize to something that does not exist.”

“What a horrible child! I fear what will happen to you in the future! How can you even think of opposing the gods!? This is why you are an orphan.”

The gentleman looked at Akuto with a look of contempt.

Akuto was shocked. He was not so much shocked at the contempt as he was that a man he had thought was such a good person could say such discriminatory things.

“Have you fallen so far into your belief in a system created by humans that you have no idea what horrible things you are saying?” asked Akuto in a trembling voice.

“Give it a rest! Everyone believes in it, so what does it matter!? And are you really going to oppose someone who is willing to give you money!?”

At this point, the teachers noticed the gentleman’s shouting and dragged Akuto away. They bowed down to the gentleman, somehow managed to get the donation out of him, and had the other orphans sing for him. In the end, the gentleman left in a good mood.

One male teacher sighed, turned a bitter smile in Akuto’s direction, and spoke with a slight tone of amusement.

“You know, there are times when you need to bow down in apology even when you are right.”

The teacher did not expect Akuto to understand. However, Akuto fully understood yet still shook his head.

“I will make sure I never have to do that. I just have to be someone important, right? If I can do what is right at a time like this, nothing could be easier.”

The teacher’s eyes opened wide.

“Then I hope you become someone truly important. But it will not be that easy.”

The teacher’s words seemed to drift into the distance and Akuto finally realized this was a dream. He had been recalling something from the past.

Chapter 1: Someone is Targeting Someone

Part 1

Akuto awoke feeling frustrated.

—Honestly, why do I have to remember something like that?

He was good looking but had a mean look to his face. When he scowled, no one wanted to be anywhere near him.

However, he did not need to worry about anyone he did not know well seeing his face. Constant Magic Academy was on a long break, so few people were left in the dorms. Akuto was all alone where he had been napping under a tree behind the dorm. He looked up to see birds flying peacefully through the sky.

—This weather is so nice I feel like nothing bad is going to happen. I must be a really rebellious person to remember something like that at a cheerful time like this.

Akuto smiled in self-mockery before hearing a distant voice.

“A-chaan! There you are.”

Soga Keena was running over to him with a huge smile on her face. That was the expression of someone with no worries. A few tufts of red hair on the top of her head swayed back and forth. He could never stay in a bad mood while looking at them. Keena plopped down on the ground next to Akuto.

“I had nothing to do, so I felt like going outside.”

“I see.”

Keena looked like she wanted to say something, so Akuto tried to get it out of her.

“What is it?”

“Um, well. Do you know when your birthday is, A-chan?”

“Well, I was an orphan. The orphanage often had to choose an arbitrary one, so they went with the day we were abandoned. For me, it was December 25.”

As soon as he said that, Akuto recalled that Keena had been an orphan, too. It was a difficult topic for those who were not orphans, but Keena replied cheerfully.

“I see. I didn’t know mine, so I decided on one for myself.”

Keena suddenly began to fidget around.

“What is it?” Akuto asked once more.

Keena smiled shyly and said, “Um, when my birthday comes, will you celebrate it with me?”

“Of course.”

When Akuto naturally agreed, Keena’s shoulders relaxed in relief.

“Thank goodness. After all, it’s the birthday I decided for myself. I can get lost in my own thoughts sometimes, right? I thought you might be too shocked this time.”

“You’ve shocked me more than enough already. In fact, you shocked me enough the first time we met,” said Akuto with a shrug.

“Eh? Don’t be so mean.”

“You randomly decided to call yourself my observer.”

“But I was so lonely before meeting you, A-chan. And it is true that I watch over you…”

“What day is it?” he asked.

“Eh?”

“Your birthday.”

“U-um, it’s coming up soon, but I’ll tell you once it’s here.”

“But then I might not be with you that day.”

“That just means you have to be with me every day, right?”

“I see you’re being selfish again.”

Akuto sighed and Keena shook her head as if to shake free of something.

“H-hey, A-chan! This is really nice weather! Let’s play!”

Akuto could not simply refuse her. He might have done so before, but he had started to feel mysteriously at ease while with Keena.

“Play? But I’m not too good at just having fun. I suppose I can play some kind of game with you, though. What should we do?” he asked.

Keena energetically replied, “Let’s take a nap!”

“Eh? A nap? But I just woke up from one…”

But by the time he said that, Keena had already leaned up against him and fallen sleep.

—In a way, she has some amazing talents.

Akuto decided to remain still so as not to wake Keena. He pulled out his student handbook and activated the library function. A mana screen was projected in front of his chest and he began to read a book he was interested in. He had a feeling he might be able to learn something from an ancient religious studies book. He received some suggestions for his own thoughts from the book, but he could not grasp how he could think like that gentleman had.

—If thinking about it will only make me feel self-important, maybe I should just not think about it. Like Keena does.

Akuto looked up from the book and began playing with Keena’s hair as it swayed in front of his face.

“No, no. That isn’t a good place for a seedling to grow. A better place would be…”

As she slept, Keena muttered something nonsensical in a serious tone of voice.

Akuto had no idea why, but he got the feeling a moment like this would never come again. A premonition seemed to numb the core of his mind. It made him feel like some change was coming and he felt nostalgic for only five seconds ago.

—I don’t pray to any god, but it’s almost like I have religious faith in Keena.

Suhara could be summed up as a god that valued nationalism. The military forces protecting the country were divided into two large categories: the knights and the imperial army. However, only Suhara followers were allowed in the latter.

Suhara was passionate about protecting the law, family lineage, and honor. Suhara also gave permission to use powerful attack magic for those who took courageous actions. This was why Suhara followers were generally viewed as polite and family oriented yet inflexible and violent.

The top position among Suhara followers was the high priest. The man who currently held the position was named Teruya Keizou. He was the father of Teruya Eiko who had troubled Akuto in the past. The Teruya family primarily carried out intelligence work. During the many years without a

war against an external enemy, their power had only continued to grow. In the present day, they had succeeded in gathering the influence needed to take the position of the family in control of both the army and navy. They had long been in conflict with the Hattori family that protected important members of the government. Neither wished to let the other hold the position of high priest. However, it had been decided that the Hattori family had already earned enough honor in their direct service to the emperor, so the Teruya family had won out in the end.

Teruya Keizou was a rare sort of man who proudly and boldly carried out cowardly and evil actions. Those who had been driven to ruin by him all agreed on that point. He had stolen and assassinated without fear, hesitation, or even growing drunk on the pleasure. Even after becoming high priest, he had directly ended people's lives more than just once or twice.

At some point an evil shadow had appeared on his face. Everyone could feel it, but his actual expression had grown gentle and bright as the years had gone by. As Keizou adjusted his posture as he sat in Japanese clothing, he was a bizarre existence who was clearly evil yet could only be seen as a saint.

Keizou currently had a rare look of concern. His eyes that usually appeared to be smiling were now emitting a sharp light upwards.

Keizou was inside the temple of Suhara. It was a large shrine in a quiet forest outside of the imperial capital. A majestic tile-roofed shrine could be seen past the torii. Inside the actual shrine, the bamboo blind was opened. Enshrined within was the god tree which held the god. The god tree was a stump about the size of a human being. It stood straight up in front of Keizou who sat atop woven rattan. The god tree was the device used when a human needed to contact Suhara. No one except Keizou was currently inside the shrine. He was directly speaking with the god.

"Is this really the individual?" asked Keizou in a probing voice.

Two shrine maidens then walked out from behind the god tree. They possessed identical beautiful faces. They moved to the left and right and stood before Keizou.

"That is Suhara's decision."

"Leave the final decision to us."

They were L'Isle-Adams. They existed to provide assistance when the conversation between god and human was not going well. Their official position was that of bishop which was higher than high priest. However,

that was in name only. The high priest was the only one with the authority to change the actual program of the god. In effect, the position of high priest was higher than that of the god.

However, the situation was slightly different in Suhara's case.

"Is this really who we are to assassinate?" asked Keizou once more.

Suhara would occasionally inform the high priest if it was confirmed that an individual had committed treason. The god monitored people's actions via the mana that filled the atmosphere. If proof was obtained that someone was a rebel, the high priest would be sent the evidence and the individual's location.

This system was of course kept a secret from the public and many of the high government officials who did know about it were critical of it. However, those officials were forced to admit it was effective. It allowed any rebellion against the empire to be stopped before it reached any large scale.

"You are not being told to assassinate this individual."

"However, the individual's treason has already been confirmed."

The shrine maidens both spoke.

"But I have been given no evidence."

That was why Keizou was so concerned. He had been given data on the alleged rebel's location. However, he had been given no specific charges or evidence.

"The evidence cannot be revealed."

"Not even to the high priest."

Keizou was keenly aware of how abnormal this announcement was. A high priest of course understood that a god was nothing more than a system.

—Should I use the cancellation code?

Keizou worried over whether he should use his authority as high priest. If he used the cancellation code, he would be able to rewrite the god's program. In the off chance that something had gone wrong with Suhara, he could handle it.

—But the priests would likely criticize me for overturning the god's decision based on my own will. And if an error in the system is found now, it would mean the previous assassinations were mistakes as well.

The god merely provided information on rebels. It was up to the high priest whether they would be killed or captured. And Keizou was fond of

assassination. When he had only been a normal priest, he had tricked his political enemies into rebelling and then used that as evidence to kill them. If the past killings were thrown into question, it could easily lead to his downfall.

—I would usually use a special unit from the military, but I will stick with my personal troops for this one.

"In that case, I will take this data. Leave the rest to me." said Keizou.

The shrine maidens nodded.

"Understood. Please do. However…"

"Even if you are a high priest, how you handle this data could be deemed a rebellion against the empire."

"Do not forget that."

As the shrine maidens took turns speaking, they spun around.

—What?

They had never made a threat like that before. In fact, it should have been impossible for the system of a god to do so. The only possibility he could come up with was that the god had gained something akin to free will.

"Wait. What was that threat?" he asked, but the two shrine maidens had already disappeared behind Suhara. And Suhara said nothing. "Either way, I just have to kill the target. That's what I was planning to do anyway."

After that announcement to Suhara, Keizou stood.

—Suhara is gaining a will? No, it couldn't be. Either way, once this has been taken care of, I can reveal Suhara's odd behavior to the priests as a separate matter. This is only the life of a single young girl. It will be over quickly.

Data floated before Keizou's eyes on a mana screen. He flicked it to mark it as secret. The data displayed a red-haired girl with a huge smile on her face. Her name was displayed as well.

"Soga Keena. I have never heard that name before, but she appears to be about the same age as my daughter. Poor thing."

Part 2

The Hattori family had an antagonistic relationship with the Teruya family. The eldest daughter of that family, Hattori Junko, was currently seriously worried.

—What am I supposed to do? I can only think this is a problem I can never resolve…

She held her student handbook which could be used as a communications device. It currently displayed a message from her family. The subject was "The preparations for the marriage interview are complete."

—If they have already made the preparations, it means father has already heard. I cannot back out now.

Junko was hiding in the woods behind the dorms. She had a mana screen set up in front of her to camouflage herself among the trees. No one could find her if they simply glanced around.

And Junko was currently watching Keena nap and Akuto read a book next to her.

Akuto was the one she was to have a marriage interview with. Junko had not done anything, but it seemed Korone had already contacted the Hattori family.

Korone was an artificial human called a L'Isle-Adam sent by the government to be Akuto's observer as it was thought he would become a demon king. The political situation behind it seemed to be complex. Some hardliners wished to eliminate Akuto to eliminate the risk of the demon king. To prevent that, it had been suggested that he could marry into the distinguished Hattori family. That was the situation when Junko had received this message.

—Father seemed in a good mood from the message. It is a political marriage, but women of the Hattori family have walked down more tragic paths when it comes to love. He said I could have a happy marriage compared to some other examples… He also cheerfully said that a heavy burden has been taken from my younger sister's shoulders. With the continuation of the family resting on my shoulders, she can do whatever she wants just as before. That is a good thing I suppose. But one problem remains.

That problem was the fact that she had not told Akuto about any of this. The day of the marriage interview was drawing close. Junko needed to tell him before long.

—Wh-wh-what am I supposed to do? Can I just tell him the day of the marriage interview has been decided? But how am I supposed to say it?

—"The day of the marriage interview has been decided." "Eh? Whose?" "M-mine and yours!" "Wait a second. You decided this without asking what I thought? Please do not treat this like I do not have a will of my own. I thought

you at least would understand…" He's sure to make that complaint! So how am I supposed to say it? Like this?

—"Please marry me!" "W-wait a second. We aren't old enough for that. Are you teasing me?" No, that will not work. I cannot start with the marriage. I-I know. I need to see how he feels about it first.

—"Do you like me?" "Of course, Hattori-san. You do everything properly and I can trust you." Yes, that is the kind of guy he is. That will not work either. What am I supposed to say? Wait, isn't it my feelings that are the issue here?

—"I love you. Please be my husband." No, no, no. I can't say that! And is that really how I feel? What do I want between us? I thought I simply wanted to be by his side and to see him? And if his heart belongs to another woman, I am completely fine with-…

—"If you are that worried about this, how about I tell him?"

—No, I have to take responsibility here. I have to do it myself.

"I see."

—Yes. Wait, why is someone else entering my thoughts!?

"You are speaking out loud. This camouflage was meaningless."

"R-really? How much did you hear?"

"From the point when you began those strange one-man plays."

"Eh…?"

Junko looked over to find a feminine face so beautiful it took the breath away from even another girl. It was Korone. She was looking at Junko expressionlessly. Junko's own face froze over in an instant. Her face reddened with a soft bursting sound and she curled up.

"D-do not peer into people's hearts! Such humiliation!"

"Again: you were speaking out loud. But do not worry. I will keep this information secret. It relates to my mission."

"R-really?"

Junko looked relieved.

"Really. I have come to understand that humans wish to hide their sexual desire," stated Korone calmly.

"S-sexual desire? Y-you idiot! Marriage is sacred… And a political marriage is not about that!"

“In that case, you should be able to tell Akuto-san without difficulty. Even if he initially refuses, he should rethink his decision if you explain that it is a political decision.”

Korone had a point, so Junko was not sure how to respond. After being told that, she had no choice but to tell Akuto herself, so she felt cornered.

“Y-you are right. Yes. I was just thinking of going over there.”

Junko removed the camouflage and began walking.

But the area Akuto and Keena had been in was deserted.

“Wait… They are gone. Th-that means I have to wait until tomorrow to tell him. Yes, I have no choice. That is what I will do.”

With that stiff comment, Junko turned around.

And found Korone’s face waiting for her.

“It seems Keena-san woke up and announced she was hungry. They went to the dining hall for some food. This Sai Akuto Detector pinpoints his location as the dining hall.”

Korone held up a strange-shaped device.

“That certainly is a convenient device,” complained Junko.

However, Korone was not lying.

“The dining hall,” said Korone as she brought her face in close to Junko’s.

Her face was as cruel as an expressionless face could be.

“F-fine! I just have to go, right!?” shouted Junko as she turned toward the dining hall in the dorm.

Not many students remained at the school and it was not meal time, so Akuto and Keena were the only two in the dining hall. Akuto sat at the center of a long table while reading a book on a small screen. Keena was at one end of the dining hall scooping white rice directly out of a rice cooker. This seemed the perfect chance to speak with Akuto alone.

Junko cut across the dining hall while stepping extra loudly to make sure he noticed her. She was too embarrassed to look him in the face, so she walked to the center of the table while still facing to the side. After she felt she was close enough, she spoke.

“Hey, could you go along with me somewhere the day after tomorrow? Oh, it is nothing difficult. It is just a bit of business at my family home. I just wondered if you would go along with me. I mean nothing more by this. It is simply a political matter and my father and family would like to meet you.

My home is fairly far away and a feast will be held, so I am afraid you will have to spend the night. My home is large though, so it will not be a problem."

"Wait a second. What kind of business are you talking about?"

"You will see when you get there. It is a political matter, but it should do a lot to help. Do not worry. I will make sure there are no problems for you. The feast will be plenty large to make up for your time. My hometown of Iga has excellent food."

"I see. That's great and all, but I don't think I should be going."

"No, this is about you. If you do not go…eh?"

Junko finally looked forward. Her classmate Hiroshi was standing there. He was short and still gave off a mischievous impression.

Junko looked around. It seemed Hiroshi had arrived next to Akuto without her noticing.

"You're talking about aniki, right?"

Having realized Junko's mistake, Hiroshi was grinning. That grin made Junko want to dig in her heels and refuse to admit her mistake.

"W-well, yes. I was talking about Sai Akuto there. But what I told you was not a mistake! You come, too! That will make everything more lively," roared Junko as she pointed at Hiroshi.

"Please don't say that. I'm actually pretty busy."

"How are you busy? You are a student just like us," argued Junko in displeasure.

Hiroshi scratched at his head with a troubled look.

"Well, yes. That's true. Ha ha. I'm not busy at all."

"You really are acting strange. Anyway, did you hear that?" said Junko as she turned toward Akuto.

It seemed he had. He looked up from his book and nodded with a steady expression. He seemed confused by Junko's odd behavior and must have decided opposing her was not the best option.

"Oh, sure. I heard you. The day after tomorrow, right? That sure is sudden."

"I-I actually knew about this earlier, but never had a chance to tell you… No, that does not matter. At any rate, we will be taking a flying bus. It will pick us up that morning, so come with me. Hiroshi, you too!" said Junko quickly.

"Are you sure this isn't something that has nothing to do with me?"

Hiroshi did not seem convinced, but Junko glared at him harshly.

“I am not simply inviting Akuto here!”

“I-I get it. You don’t have to be so stubborn…”

“What was that?”

“No, nothing. I understand.”

Hiroshi seemed to have given up, so he sat next to Akuto.

“Good. Remember. It is the day after tomorrow!”

With that parting comment, Junko left the dining hall.

With the bare minimum of her job complete, she breathed a sigh of relief.

As Korone passed by her on the way into the dining hall, she spoke quickly.

“As his observer, I will be going with him. That is not a problem I hope.”

Junko grew angry but did not actually say anything.

At the same time, an eerie scene existed underneath the academy. Etou Fujiko trembled as she saw it illuminated by the orange circle of mana light in her hand.

She could see a lake of black liquid that’s depth she could not even guess at. Something board-shaped was floating on the shiny, oily surface. The light must have been too bright for it because it dove down into the liquid. In its place, something rod shaped with bristles growing on it poked out of the liquid. A hand covered in claws and scales then pushed that out of the way. Quite large creatures were squirming about within. And it was a mixture of everything including insects, mammals, and reptiles.

“Demonic beasts! And so many of them!”

Fujiko brought a hand to her mouth as she gave that exclamation of surprise.

Before, demonic beasts had only suddenly appeared and damaged human society. They were creatures other than humans in which an abnormality had occurred due to the mana sent inside them. In most cases, they were exterminated as dangerous beasts. Some research institutions would artificially create them to study the effect of mana on other living creatures, but it was of course banned to own them as pets. Demonic beasts usually had repulsive appearances, so people generally abhorred even the weakest of them. The demonic beasts appearing one after another from the liquid all looked like monsters from a nightmare. There was a giant centipede, an ape

with long fangs, and plenty of others. Fujiko had never expected to find something like this below Constant Magic Academy.

"…How wonderful!"

Fujiko's expression was one of pure joy. She even had heart marks in her eyes. Her long black hair and almond-shaped eyes were befitting of her position as a sworn black magician.

She had come here due to the events of a week before. During Akuto's encounter on the beach field trip, Fujiko had learned that demonic beasts were activated by the waves of the mana in his body. And this also gave the activated demonic beasts a limited level of intelligence. Fujiko adored Akuto, so she had decided to keep this fact from him.

—He is just too kind. If he knew about this, he would feel the need to protect the demonic beasts being persecuted. He would force his body too far by splitting off his mana to strengthen them! I must find a way to control the demonic beasts before that happens!

That was Fujiko's decision. In actuality, Akuto would be more likely to blame himself for the demonic beast issue, but that did not matter to Fujiko.

"If I can find a means of controlling them, Akuto-sama will surely thank me by saying this! 'Now, let us rule the world together.' And then he would embrace me… Yes, just like that…wait."

Just as Fujiko was about to embrace herself, she was brought back from her fantasy world. A tentacle was wrapping around her body.

"Hyaaaaaaaah! It's so slimy!"

The tentacle was pink and it covered her body in some kind of sticky liquid. This seemed to be a shelled demonic beast. A giant shell could be seen at the base of the thick tentacle wrapping around Fujiko. Several other thinner tentacles and two antennae with eyeballs on top also extended from the shell. It was something like a snail with tentacles. That meant the thicker tentacle must have been used as a leg.

"Wh-why is it going into my clothes!?"

The tentacle skillfully worked its way up Fujiko's body and the tip slipped into the chest of her uniform.

PuPuPuPu

“Nooo! Don’t undo the hook so skillfully! Ee! No! Don’t circle around to the fronnnntttt!”

Fujiko reached out to move the tentacle away. She did manage to grab onto the tentacle, but it was so slippery that it easily escaped her grasp.

The owner of the tentacle smiled indecently with the eyes on the end of the antennae. It seemed to have a fair bit of intelligence for a demonic beast, but that intellect had developed in a problematic direction.

“Ee…! F-fwah! No!”

The tentacle lifted Fujiko up into the air and one of the thinner tentacles wrapped around each of her legs.

“W-wait… That’s going too far…”

The tentacles spread Fujiko’s legs wide and held her in place in midair.

The look in the giant snail’s eyes grew even more indecent as it stretched all the rest of its thinner tentacles toward Fujiko’s skirt.

Once it did, the look in Fujiko’s eyes completely changed.

“I said that’s going too damn far!”

With the expression of a fearsome god, she quickly pulled a potion bottle from her pocket and threw it at the giant snail. The giant snail easily brushed it aside with a tentacle, but the bottle exploded when it landed.

The explosion was small, but it was enough of a blast to surprise the giant snail into withdrawing its tentacles. In that instant of freedom, Fujiko took a position looking down on the giant snail.

“You have some guts to be so perverted while being a hermaphrodite! I’m going to fry you up and eat you with some garlic bread, so just wait here!”

Fujiko held several potion bottles between her fingers.

The giant snail’s tentacles drew in and it looked up at her with fearful eyes.

It seemed less afraid of the exploding potions and more afraid of the look on Fujiko’s face as she held them. With a despondent look in the eyeballs at the end of the antennae, it rubbed its tentacles together as if to apologize.

Fujiko placed a leg on its shell and began rubbing her foot against it.

“As long as you understand.”

But the giant snail somehow appeared to be enjoying being stepped on. Also, the eyeballs on the antennae were looking up Fujiko’s skirt while she lifted up the one leg.

Once Fujiko noticed the look in the giant snail's eyes, she shouted, "You still don't understand!?"

She kicked the giant snail through the air and it seemed to finally surrender. It bowed down and began waving its tentacles up and down toward Fujiko.

Finally, Fujiko's fearsome look grew gentler.

"You still look oddly happy," complained Fujiko.

Apparently the giant snail was the type that enjoyed being kicked by a beautiful woman.

"Are all demonic beasts like this?" asked Fujiko as she turned around and a voice replied from the darkness.

"They are not all like this. This one has special preferences."

Claws suddenly lifted up the giant snail. The snail seemed confused about what was happening, but the look in its eyes changed once it turned around.

A 15 meter dragon was staring back at it with a bored expression.

His body was covered in black scales that shined like metal. His claws and the fangs visible in his mouth were clearly meant for battle and a great sense of intimidation rose from his entire body.

That black dragon named Peterhausen tossed the giant snail into the pool it had come from.

"If I was not here, you would only be able to control the ones like that giant snail."

Peterhausen indicated the pool that several demonic beasts were attempting to leave. They were all filled with hostility. Fujiko quickly realized that Peterhausen's presence was the only thing keeping them from coming up.

"What is this?" she asked Peterhausen.

"They will not oppose anyone stronger than themselves. They are animals, after all."

"Why are so many of these animals here?"

"This pool is filled with a liquid that cuts off the effects of mana. Some of the poor demonic beasts have a long lifespan, so this was created to let them sleep."

"A long lifespan? So did the previous demon king leave them here?"

"Yes. Occasionally, one of them would awaken, but they have all been filled with energy as my current master has awakened."

“That means I was actually in danger.”

“Just be glad that one was the one that attacked you first.”

Peterhausen pointed toward the giant snail that was attempting to leave the pool once more.

“Then I will make convenient use of it to thank it,” said Fujiko.

At any rate, she could not help but be filled with some joy. The academy’s underground labyrinth was famous for demonic beasts occasionally appearing within it, so she had guessed its greatest depths would hold some clues about them. However, this was more than she could have hoped for. It seemed Peterhausen had known the truth from the beginning, but he seemed to avoid interfering too much. If she did not act on her own to determine the truth, he would not explain it to her. Entering the deepest depths of the underground labyrinth without Peterhausen’s support was dangerous, but it had been worth it.

“But I get the feeling the others in here could be quite useful,” commented Fujiko with a grin.

“And what exactly do you plan to do with them?” asked Peterhausen with a grin of his own as if he already knew the answer.

Fujiko’s smile grew even fiercer.

“Akuto-sama cannot yet fully control demonic beasts as the demon king, correct? In that case, I will find a way of controlling them.”

“No one besides the demon king has ever been able to control a demonic beast.”

“That is because the demon king has never had someone like me at his side. And research never went anywhere because everyone assumed demonic beasts were merely a bug caused by mana. Now that I know they are activated by Akuto-sama’s characteristic mana waves, my research should proceed at an accelerated rate. And you will help, won’t you?”

“What a pain. Why do you think I would?”

“You are avoiding interference because Akuto-sama needs to awaken of his own free will, correct? Surely you would like to interfere with those around him as long as it will not affect his free will.”

Fujiko and Peterhausen exchanged a grin.

“That is mostly accurate. However, that is not the only reason I am avoiding interfering. And I cannot yet tell you what the other reason is.”

“By any chance do you like conspiracies? I certainly do.”

“Ha ha ha. This is a bit too big to call a conspiracy. It may even be beyond human understanding.”

Peterhausen skillfully raised a single eyebrow.

Part 3

Keena was scooping rice from the rice cooker as usual. Junko had left, so Akuto and Hiroshi had nothing better to do than watch her.

“Aniki, how much is Keena-chan going to eat?”

“Who knows. It may not look it, but she’s actually taking her time here. She usually eats three rice cookers full, so she has to savor every bite when she only has the one.”

“That’s amazing,” said Hiroshi admiringly. “But more importantly, what was with the class rep? Is it really okay for me to go to her home?”

“How should I know? Even if it didn’t seem like she meant to invite you, a promise is a promise. And I would prefer to not go alone. Apparently, it’s a political issue… But anyway, are you okay? You’ve seemed tired lately.”

Akuto turned toward Hiroshi.

He did not look well. However, he did not look exactly ill. It seemed he had been performing frequent exhausting jobs without getting much sleep.

“I-I’m fine. It’s nothing,” denied Hiroshi as he waved his hands in front of himself.

He then brought up a mana screen showing a television broadcast to further dodge the question.

“I hope you’re right,” said Akuto as he looked over Hiroshi.

He looked exhausted, but a sense of fulfillment could be heard in his voice and seen in the glint in his eye. Akuto felt Hiroshi had somewhat changed recently. He had always been cheerful and sociable, but it seemed as if confidence had been added on top of that.

“Has anything changed recently?” asked Akuto, but Hiroshi smiled bashfully.

“No, no. Nothing really. I’ve just started to understand how you feel.”

“How I feel?”

“Y’know, that desire to help people out.”

“No, I don’t really know,” replied Akuto with a smile.

For some reason, Hiroshi blushed, averted his gaze, and pointed at the television broadcast.

“L-look. It’s a live report by the popular idol Hoshino Yuri-chan.”

On the screen, a short and beautiful girl was smiling and waving her hand. It seemed to be a report on an event occurring somewhere. Behind the idol named Hoshino Yuri, advertisement panels and tents were lined up. It seemed to be some kind of corporate exhibition.

“Is she popular?” asked Akuto who was fairly ignorant about such things.

“Yes. You’re really behind the times, aniki. She’s a singer, an actress, and is even great at witty talks. It hasn’t been long since her debut, but she’s already standing at the top of all sorts of fields,” explained Hiroshi excitedly.

“That’s amazing. But I get the feeling I’ve seen her somewhere before…”

Akuto tilted his head in puzzlement. He did not recognize her face at all, but he could not help but feel he had met her somewhere before.

“C’mon, aniki. You probably just saw her on TV without realizing it.”

Hiroshi jabbed Akuto with his elbow.

“I suppose you’re right. Honestly, I can be pretty stupid, can’t I?”

Akuto smiled at almost the same moment as screams erupted from the screen.

They looked over in shock to find people screaming and fleeing within the event grounds. The cameraman seemed to have panicked because the footage waved around and alternately showed the sky and ground. This allowed occasional glimpses of nonhuman black shadows cutting across the screen.

“Demonic beasts?” said Hiroshi.

In the next moment, the camera focused in on a large bird demonic beast. It soon became clear there were a large number of them and they were wildly attacking the people and tents.

“This is an emergency! Where is that?” asked Akuto.

Hiroshi stared at the screen as he answered.

“That’s the floating island at the bay. I’ve been there before. It’s a location made specifically for events that floats using mana. Unless they can use flight magic, they can’t escape!”

“Surely they have boats in case of accidents.”

“They do, but they’re just for accidents. It will take several minutes to line up and board them, but there will be a lot of victims if they’re being attacked like this the whole time!”

“What about the knights?”

“They should be sent out, but only the light knights can fly…”

As if to back up Hiroshi’s words, several knights flew into view on the screen. The people cried out, thinking they were saved, but it seemed the knights’ magic and guns were ineffective against the demonic beasts. They were easily knocked from the sky by the demonic beasts.

“This is bad. Can’t the heavy knights do something?”

“It will take time for them to be sent out. They have to take a flying landing ship,” said Hiroshi while looking at Akuto with a troubled look. “A-aniki…I need to go and-…I mean, I just remembered something I have to do.”

“Eh?”

Akuto looked back at Hiroshi thinking that was an odd thing to say at a time like this, but Hiroshi looked completely serious. He then said something even odder.

“Th-this will probably become something really cruel, so it would be best not to watch! I-I’ll turn off the TV.”

Hiroshi deactivated the mana screen and quickly left.

—*What was that?*

Akuto was confused, but he had an obedient personality at least in a certain sense. As Hiroshi had asked, he kept TV off and instead simply watched Hiroshi run off. Even so, it would leave a bad taste in his mouth if he did nothing and gathered no information on the incident. Akuto stood up and told Keena he was leaving the dining hall. He wanted to speak with the student council president who he had heard had not returned home for the break.

After Hiroshi ran outside, he made sure no one was around and held the bracelet on his wrist up to his face. He spoke a single word.

“Brave.”

A mechanical voice played from the bracelet.

<Command received. The unit will now activate. Creating dimensional fault. All foreign substances within the space 5 cm from the user will be eliminated.>

Hiroshi heard a slight bursting noise and his body was wrapped in light.

<Welcome, Brave. Transferring main unit body. Transfer will take 0.2 seconds. Transfer complete. Electrical components functioning normal. Life support system functioning normal. Outside air circulation mode selected. Activation of nuclear fusion engine awaiting mental input.>

Before the voice finished speaking, Hiroshi's body was completely covered by a suit. Other than the helmet that left his mouth exposed, he appeared to be wearing a skintight riding suit.

The suit did not rely on mana to run. That was a rarity in this era. It was a piece of anti-magic combat equipment that had been passed down by Hiroshi's family due to bizarre circumstances. It acted based on Hiroshi's will and had tremendous combat ability.

"Show me the map. Display my current location," muttered Hiroshi and an image appeared on the helmet's visor.

"I want to arrive in one minute…no, within thirty seconds."

While wearing the suit, Hiroshi floated up into the air from just lightly kicking off the ground. He quickly accelerated upwards high into the sky and then began flying horizontally.

The dot on the map indicating his location quickly approached his destination at the floating island.

Once he had learned the demonic beasts were activating in response to Akuto's internal mana waves, Hiroshi had secretly begun hunting the demonic beasts. He was not doing it for Akuto's sake, but he felt the situation would improve if he continued doing it. He had only begun hunting recently, but rumors of a mysterious hero exterminating demonic beasts had already begun to spread. Some had even reached Hiroshi directly. Helping others and acting as a true hero gave him an incomparable feeling of pleasure.

Fortunately, his identity had not been revealed. The suit he wore was illegal. If he was to continue his hunt, he needed to hide his identity. On top of that, he wished to keep this a secret from Akuto and the others.

The instant after he spotted the floating island, he had already arrived directly above it. He could see a great number of people in the plaza down below. To Hiroshi, it looked like more people were standing still than were

fleeing. They were likely waiting for their turn in the emergency exits and escape boats. They could only form small groups and watch the demonic beasts in fear of them approaching.

The light knights were resisting, but they appeared more focused on protecting themselves than anything. Even so, they would draw the demonic beasts' attention, move away when they approached, and then draw their attention once more. Their expressions were perfectly serious as they repeated this process.

"Confirm the locations of the demonic beasts and track them. Let's use the high frequency blade," said Hiroshi.

Claw-like blades extended from the hand guard on the back of his right hand. After lightly swinging his hand once, Hiroshi let gravity take over to begin his descent. He accelerated to a tremendous speed and slammed into one of the demonic beasts.

The large bird demonic beast was trying to crush a light knight's head with its talons, but it froze in place when an object dropped down right next to it.

The light knight's expression changed from fear to confusion. His vision had been blocked by the talons, but it suddenly cleared.

The demonic beast split into three pieces along perfectly straight lines. Before it could even cry out, the demonic beast burst into blood and feathers and fell to the earth.

The people on the ground quickly noticed what had happened in the sky.

"Look…!"

"It's the rumored Brave! It's the demonic beast hunter Brave!"

Once one person cried out, people all over began cheering.

Hiroshi waved at the people down below and some elderly men and women even waved back while smiling like children.

Hiroshi's body trembled as fresh joy welled up from the bottom of his heart, but this was no time to lose focus. He checked the dots indicating the locations of the demonic beasts on the map displayed on his visor. He circled around behind another nearby one and easily sliced it apart with the high frequency blade. As that demonic beast's corpse fell, he moved toward his next target. His speed and the splendid sharpness of the blades kept even a single drop of blood from reaching his suit.

It seemed the demonic beasts had decided Hiroshi was a priority target. They gathered around him one after another. By the time he took out a

third, a ring of demonic beasts had formed around him. They began circling around him at a distance of about 10 meters.

“I’m surrounded. With the people down below, I can’t use any of the explosive weapons. Can I avoid it if they all attack at once?” muttered Hiroshi.

Their wild instincts must have picked up on that fear because the demonic beasts all moved in closer as they continued to circle him. Sharp talons and beaks attacked Hiroshi from every direction.

“Transfer in the monomolecular cutter.”

<Understood. Transferring monomolecular cutter.>

A dull light appeared on the suit’s left hand. At the same moment, the demonic beasts moved in close enough from every direction that he could not see beyond them.

The faces of the people watching on from below clouded over for an instant. A stir came over them that might have been due to surprise or despair.

However, the people saw an unbelievable sight in the next moment.

As the demonic beasts almost seemed to form a single sphere, the center split open. Pills and giant spherical capsules used at parties were made to split down the middle. This looked almost identical.

“This is the first time I’ve used the monomolecular cutter…”

Hiroshi’s voice trembled in surprise and a bit of fear.

A slight glimmer extended as a string from the fingertip of the suit’s left hand. At the end of that string floated a small unit like a detached fingernail. Between the unit and the finger was a wire only as thick as a single molecule. It functioned exactly like a sharp blade.

The gathered demonic beasts had been sliced to pieces in an instant by it.

<The monomolecular cutter has deteriorated due to the absorption of outside matter. If no other instructions are given, it will be disposed of.>

From what the suit’s computer said, it seemed the sharper the blade, the more quickly it dulled.

Hiroshi avoided the demonic beast corpses raining down from above and checked how many were remaining. There was only one left. He instructed the suit to dispose of the monomolecular cutter and it disappeared in an instant. It seemed the main body of the suit was located in a different dimension and everything from the equipment to the power was transferred over. Apparently, the reverse was done for disposal.

He could not see the final one right away, but he hurried to the location of the dot on the map. The crowd below cheered for him. They did not seem to realize one still remained.

The final dot was in the very back of a row of advertisement tents. Hiroshi shot by between the tents and discovered why he had not seen it. At the end of the row was a warehouse. The demonic beast had to be inside.

The large warehouse had also been turned into an exhibit. The large delivery door was closed. There was also a door for people to pass through, but Hiroshi decided it was faster to fly through a window than land and use the door.

After making sure no one was down below, he broke through the window and into the warehouse.

He quickly grasped the situation. A single person had escaped into the warehouse but had unfortunately been spotted. The piles of boxes created a labyrinth of passageways. At the end, a demonic beast was repeatedly slamming its body against a door. The door was made of bars, so Hiroshi could tell someone was hiding behind it. The door seemed to lead to the manager's office. The person had managed to escape inside, but the demonic beast could see they were there and it was a dead end.

Hiroshi approached from behind the demonic beast and severed both its wings from its body with the high frequency blade before it could notice him and turn around. It was shaped like a bird, so it used its wings to maintain its balance even while attacking a door meant for humans to pass through. The demonic beast toppled to the floor and let out a strange cry. Hiroshi thrust the blade into it and put it out of its misery.

"Hoo…"

Hiroshi stepped over the demonic beast's corpse and tried to open the door, but he found unexpected resistance. The person beyond the door seemed to be in a state of complete panic. A frantic voice leaked out through the door. It seemed this was a young woman. Hiroshi spoke in an attempt to calm her down.

"Do not worry. The demonic beast has been eliminated."

The strength holding the door in place suddenly lessened. Hiroshi turned the doorknob and a girl fell out.

Hiroshi looked at her in surprise. She was Hoshino Yuri, the idol he had seen on TV earlier.

After seeing Hiroshi, Hoshino Yuri began crying in relief.

“W-waaahhhh! It was so scary!”

Her crying was quite loud. Even Hiroshi was surprised. He was forced to adjust the volume in his helmet. But…

—*She really is cute…*

Hiroshi was entranced by Hoshino Yuri.

After a bit, Yuri stopped crying and she looked Hiroshi over from top to bottom.

“You saved me! Thank you. I really don’t like demonic beasts! You’re that Brave who has become famous recently, aren’t you? You really are cool!”

Yuri suddenly embraced Hiroshi. And even more surprisingly, she gave a quick kiss to the lips his helmet did not cover.

—*Wow…*

In his surprise, Hiroshi straightened his back. Once Yuri moved away, he looked at her more closely.

She was shorter than Hiroshi and her face looked more youthful than his, but she had a hint of maturity she hid from others as if she held a great intensity in private. Her expression was mischievous and she gave off an aura that brought unease. It was as if she would try something the instant you let your guard down. And along with all that, she seemed like the kind of girl who would always be the center of attention.

“Keep this a secret.”

Yuri brought a finger to her lips and winked.

At the same time, the warehouse’s large door opened and a group of knights entered. Hiroshi could see it on his visor without having to turn around, so he spoke to Yuri in an attempt to look good.

“Then keep me a secret too. It seems the knights want to know who I am.”

“Really? But you can tell me! I’ll keep it a secret. I want to meet you in secret later!”

Hiroshi actually wanted to give in to the temptation, but he somehow managed to keep quiet. He waved at Yuri, jumped up, and flew toward the knights. The knights began flying after him, but they could not keep up with his speed. He left the warehouse door in an instant. He circled through the sky while listening to the applause and cheers of the people, but then charged high into the sky to lose his pursuers.

Part 4

Keena finished eating her rice after Akuto left the dining hall. She felt tired, so she left the dining hall to go take a nap in Akuto’s room.

But then she stopped. A man wearing white stood in the dorm hallway.

He was tall and had perfect style. His hair was perfectly arranged and a bit long for a man. He had clear eyes and a graceful face. He was so beautiful that a look at him would put any girl in a good mood. He appeared to be the same age as Keena or a little older.

When he saw her, he gave a silent bow and walked toward her.

“Hm?”

Keena tilted her head in puzzlement because she did not recognize him.

“Good day.”

Keena gave a deep bow in response to that polite greeting.

“Good day. Who are you? Do you need something?” asked Keena.

His expression clouded over slightly, but he quickly formed a smile as if to say that had been nothing. He then pulled a handbook out of his pocket.

“I work for the Cabinet Office. I have business with this school, but it seems I am a bit lost.”

Keena checked the badge in the handbook he opened. It looked splendid, so she assumed it was real.

“Where would you like to go? I can lead you there.”

Keena spoke different from normal. This caused the man’s face to cloud over once more.

“I would like to meet with whoever is in charge of security.”

“Understood. We do not hire anyone specifically for that purpose, so the student council handles it. I will show you to the student council room… What is it?”

Noticing the man’s expression, Keena peered at his face.

The man returned her gaze and narrowed his dazzling eyes.

“Oh, nothing. Seeing you simply gives me a somewhat nostalgic feeling.”

“What a lovely thing to say. But have we ever met?”

“Now then, my name is Bouichirou. Yamato Bouichirou.”

Keena tilted her head in puzzlement once more.

“Sorry. I do not recognize that name.”

“I see.” Bouichirou let out a sigh. “You do not need to lead me to the student council room. If you simply tell me where it is, I can find it myself.”

“Is that so?”

Keena explained where the student council room was. Bouichirou bowed and walked away.

“Thank you very much. Until we meet again.”

“Eh? We’re going to meet again?”

Keena returned to her usual tone of voice. It was as if a different personality appeared on the surface only while she was facing Bouichirou.

He turned around and smiled.

“We will. As long as you remain who you are, we most certainly will.”

When Akuto knocked on the door to the student council room, the student council president, Lily Shiraishi, was inside. She was working at her desk, so she looked up and invited Akuto in.

She was a short girl wearing a stylish hat. She had a determined and mischievous face and did not look much like a student council president, but she acted as if she was used to standing above others.

“What is it?” asked Lily cheerfully as she tipped up the brim of her hat with a finger.

“Oh, it isn’t anything too important.”

As Akuto explained the details of the demonic beast attack, Lily’s expression grew tense. Lily knew that the demonic beasts were essentially born from Akuto. However, she had decided not to inform him of this for the time being. She assumed the government had a reason for leaving the issue alone and she planned to investigate what the situation was behind the scenes.

“In that case, why not check the news from each location? I make a habit of viewing the news from every station,” said Lily as she slid a hand across the desk.

Several mana screens appeared and they all displayed a different broadcast. When Lily narrowed it down to only the incident in question, the number of screens decreased to about 20. They were all showing footage of that incident. The footage showed the actions of Brave Hiroshi. The two of them did not know Brave’s identity, but Akuto had felt something during his run-in with Brave during the beach field trip. However, Akuto trusted people a little too much, so he tried as much as possible to not touch on Hiroshi’s strange actions.

“Is that guy in the suit popular?”

“Yes. He has been exterminating demonic beasts all over the place. The knights can’t teleport in because the mana cost is too high, so they can’t respond as quickly as him. He always takes all the credit just before they can do anything about it, so they seem to be feeling resentful. That’s why he’s popular with the general public, but the knights are desperately trying to capture him since what he is doing is illegal. For some reason, there are no records of his actions and his mana cannot be traced. That suit must have some kind of mana canceller in it. Possessing an illegal object like that is a serious crime.”

“I see.”

“Oh, but the biggest worry is that his equipment is specialized for anti-magic combat. He seems to be trying to help people for now, but who knows what he could do later. He could easily become what they call a vigilante.”

“A vigilante?”

“Yes. Someone whose sense of justice is a little too strong, so they choose to take the law into their own hands. I have a fair bit of that myself. Ha ha ha,” laughed Lily.

“In that case, why are you worried about him becoming a vigilante?”

“A vigilante isn’t that bad a thing in and of itself. However, a great fight can break out if there are two of them.”

Lily turned a remarkably intense smile toward Akuto.

Akuto fell silent just as a knock came on the student council room door. Lily invited the person in and it turned out to be someone neither of them expected.

“Do you have a moment?”

It was a man with long white hair and a long white beard. He was so old it felt the concept of age had lost all meaning. People lived long lives in this era, but he was likely one of the oldest. At the very least, he had certainly lived over 100 years. He had said he had taken part in the war. He was the headmaster of Constant Magic Academy.

“Headmaster.”

For once, Lily actually straightened her back. Akuto also corrected his position.

“What do you need?”

Normally, the headmaster did not show up in person because he would settle everything via communications. And there was not much business of his that required he speak with a student.

“I happened to be nearby, so I decided to stop by. Okay, that was a joke. I actually had a feeling that an old acquaintance of mine would be here. I saw it in a dream. Okay, that part was a joke, too.”

The headmaster laughed, but this was no laughing matter for Lily and Akuto. Just seeing that shrewd old man left them at a loss for words.

Suddenly, the eyes mostly hidden by the headmaster’s long eyebrows grew sharp. He turned toward the door where a man had appeared at some point.

Akuto and Lily’s bodies both stiffened in surprise. This man’s presence was not normal.

He was only standing there and his expression was gentle. He was beautiful and he was sociable enough that anyone would let their guard down around him. And yet it almost seemed as if he was emitting a visual pressure.

“Nice to meet you. I suppose,” said the man, Yamato Bouichirou.

Akuto stared back at him. Bouichirou was certainly looking directly at Akuto.

Akuto was surprised, but he nodded in greeting all the same.

Bouichirou’s gaze was too gentle to be thought of as hostile, but the look in his eyes was by no means warm.

Also, Akuto recognized him. He was not entirely sure, but when he first met Peterhausen, he had seen some images that may have been a mysterious hallucination or may have been a type of mana communication. Those images had shown the man who killed Fujiko’s older brother. Akuto did not remember the man’s face clearly, but the aura surrounding Bouichirou was identical.

Lily may have noticed this as well because the look on her face had changed. She had been there when they had seen those images.

“I see this is a collection of extraordinary people,” said Bouichirou with a smile.

In the next instant, Lily shot her fist toward Bouichirou. However, she did not get up from her desk. She used mana to extend the tissues of her arm itself to send her fist toward the distant door. Her fist approached Bouichirou's jaw with the speed of a bullet.

The dry sound of flesh striking flesh reverberated throughout the student council room.

But it was Akuto's palm that Lily's fist had struck. Lily had not aimed for his palm. Akuto had been standing next to Lily the instant she had thrown the punch, but he had moved next to Bouichirou faster than her fist in order to catch it.

"At least let my hand slip," said Lily in amusement.

She had a smile on her lips.

"President, if someone enters the school unannounced, they must be working for the government, right? I do not know what this is about, but it seems wrong to suddenly punch him," said Akuto in a restrained voice.

"I know what I'm doing. The badge on his collar is enough to tell you he's from the Cabinet Office. My hand just has a bad habit of slipping when I see government officials. And look at him. That trick where you moved faster than my fist wasn't even necessary."

On Lily's instruction, Akuto turned toward Bouichirou.

He had not moved even slightly from where he had been before. His expression had not changed either. He had only moved his right hand. It was inside his inner coat pocket.

"He moved his hand without moving his center of gravity in the slightest. And it's stopped in his pocket because he saw you move and decided he did not need to remove it," said Lily.

If that was true, it meant Bouichirou had seen through both Lily and Akuto's actions. The time between the fist being thrown and Akuto stopping it had been less than 0.2 seconds.

"I would prefer if you did not suddenly do that when you first meet someone. It would be setting a bad example if I did not get angry over it," said Bouichirou with a smile.

His tone was still gentle, but the pressure floating around him suddenly increased.

"Don't get carried away, you petty official."

Lily's voice lowered and she smiled as well.

The tension grew unbearable and it was blatantly obvious the strained atmosphere would burst at any moment. Akuto turned toward Lily and squeezed her fist even tighter.

“President, you have no reason to do this.”

“Do I need a reason for a fight?”

“That is not what I mean. He has yet to say anything,” said Akuto.

Bouichirou shrugged exaggeratedly and broadened his smile.

“I came here with a warning. I want to know if this academy has the proper level of security.”

“The student council takes care of that. You have no right to find any fault in it.”

“Is trying to punch people when you first meet them part of your security?”

“You bastard!”

Lily shook off Akuto’s hand. The look on Akuto’s face changed and he took a defensive stance.

“If you’re gonna get in the way, I’ll just take both of you out…” warned Lily as she brought a hand to her hat.

Bouichirou smiled fearlessly as he saw that and began to remove his hand from his inner pocket.

In the next instant, a fierce storm would have appeared within the student council room.

However, a silly popping sound rang out instead. And some light and dry objects rained down around the room. They were potato chips.

The headmaster had failed to open a bag of them. He had pulled too hard and the entire bag had ripped apart, sending its contents scattering everywhere. Potato chip crumbs rained down on Akuto, Lily, and even Bouichirou.

“Sorry about that. The bag was too tough…”

The headmaster scratched at his head and glanced at each of the others’ faces.

“The snacks in that basket are the treasurer’s personal items, not student council equipment. Please make sure to replace that later,” said Lily half in shock.

It seemed the malicious atmosphere had been defused.

Akuto moved away from Bouichirou and gave a sigh of relief. The bag had burst at the exact instant the attacks were about to fly. If it had not been with that exact timing, everyone might have ignored it altogether.

“What a shrewd old man,” said Bouichirou as he grabbed a potato chip in his fingers and put it in his mouth.

“Do not say that. Although, I suppose it is rude to waste perfectly good potato chips like that… Oh, wait. You said shrewd, didn’t you?” The headmaster smiled and stepped in front of Bouichirou. “You need not worry about the academy’s security. We have done well enough so far. More importantly, it has been a long time since I saw you last. What position do you hold now?”

Bouichirou pulled a handbook out of his inner pocket. He opened it up to reveal a badge. Even Lily’s eyes opened wide in shock when she saw it.

“The Director of Cabinet Intelligence and Magic…?”

That post could only be achieved after rising to the top levels of the knights and working as the headmaster of the Knight Training Facility. That position provided one with a tremendous influence over the knights. Normally, no one as young as Bouichirou could hold that position no matter how skilled they were.

“Oh? The head of the Cabinet Intelligence and Magic Office? I am honored that someone like that would come to warn us directly.”

The headmaster spoke as if he and Bouichirou were old friends.

On the other hand, Bouichirou still seemed tense.

“I am here to warn you about your level of security. If something does happen here, it is possible I will interfere.”

Akuto felt that warning was directed at him.

“Are you implying I will do something?”

“No, something will be done to you,” denied Bouichirou with a quick wave of the hand.

“You are the ones that are interfering with me. I have no ambitions. And yet something odd happened on that island. Based on your position, that man must have been your subordinate. It does seem the report concerning the incident was covered up at some point, though.”

A harsh look entered Akuto’s eyes, but Bouichirou easily deflected it by narrowing his own eyes.

“You all are too innocent. You think I am your enemy, don’t you? That is true in a way, but who is your true enemy?”

Bouichirou now questioned Akuto. Akuto responded with thorns in his voice.

“Our enemy? We don’t have one. That is such a poor way of thinking. Everyone has some evil in their hearts, so we can’t blame any one person like that.”

“Humans are evil? Very true. But have neither of you realized who your true enemy is?”

Bouichirou glanced over at both Akuto and the headmaster.

“What?” said Akuto in confusion.

The headmaster did not move in the slightest.

“I came here because I felt I had the leeway to tell you this. You need to realize where your position in society is. If you ask me, you are within an evil empire. I doubt you will agree with me, though,” said Bouichirou as if to no one in particular.

“I am me. I can choose my own position,” said Akuto.

With a mocking grin, Bouichirou said, “Your thinking is too childish. Listen. If you get in my way, you will be dragged into the situation and disappear. That will allow me to avoid a lot of difficulty. I want to keep from hurting anyone if at all possible.”

“Who are you really?”

Akuto stared directly at Bouichirou. Bouichirou returned the stare. However, Bouichirou soon turned around.

“You can take this as a final warning if you wish,” he said before brushing off his shoulders and head and leaving the student council room.

“Headmaster, who was he? It looked like you knew him,” said Akuto.

“I have no idea,” said the headmaster as if feigning ignorance.

“You don’t know?” asked both Akuto and Lily.

“What I mean is that I do not who he truly is. He has been like that since I was young.”

“Like that?” asked the two students, but the headmaster began digging through the snacks in the basket as if the question was of little importance.

“He has always looked exactly like that. He has looked about the same age for around 100 years now.”

“100…years?”

“However, his occupation and position have changed frequently. I do not know if it is always the same person or if they are different people. However, they all remember me, so unless they can share memories, it would be simplest to assume it has always been the same person.”

The headmaster stopped digging through the snacks. He looked toward Akuto.

“Sai-kun.”

“Yes?”

Assuming he was being given a warning, Akuto straightened his back.

“Why does the treasurer here have so many odd-flavored snacks?”

“Perhaps…she has bad taste.”

“I see,” replied the headmaster with a nod.

Chapter 2: The Shadow of Iga Fully Revealed

Part 1

Akuto was waiting for the flying bus headed to Junko's home, but he was still bothered by what Bouichirou had said. He showed little concern over where he was headed. His mind was so disturbed even he could tell. The headmaster had continued to play dumb, so the student council president had further resolved herself to oppose Bouichirou with her influence. She had even called the three officers back from their homes. However, Akuto felt Bouichirou's visit was more than a mysterious influential official stopping by.

—*It felt like he knew a lot about me and had been observing me.*

Akuto was certain this was not just him imagining things. It had felt as if the man had known how he would act at all times.

—*Is my way of thinking being tested?*

Whatever Bouichirou's intentions were, Akuto could not help but think upcoming events would be heavily related to his inner thoughts.

"The bus is here."

"Aniki, you're staring into space. Are you tired?"

Korone and Hiroshi urged Akuto to board the bus. The flying bus that had pulled up in front of the dorm already had its door sitting open waiting for passengers. Akuto, Hiroshi, and Korone were the only ones waiting to board. Junko was of course riding with them, but she was the one who had prepared the bus. She was already on board, so she called out from within.

"Come on. Hurry up and get on."

With his luggage for a single night in hand, Akuto boarded the flying bus. Hiroshi carried a small travel bag, but Korone only had her usual bag.

Once all three boarded, the bus's doors closed almost impatiently before flying up into the sky. Akuto took a seat and casually looked out the window. He spotted Keena seeing the bus off from outside the dorm. She looked like she wanted to say something and Akuto felt there was a slight tightness in her chest, but she soon smiled and began waving. Feeling relieved, he waved back.

—*Come to think of it, I didn't get a chance to speak with her yesterday.*

After the incident with Bouichirou, he had eaten with Keena, so he could have spoken with her then. However, he had been so lost in thought that he had never actually done so.

“Come to think of it, we’re leaving Keena-chan all alone,” said Hiroshi.

“Don’t be so sentimental. We won’t be gone for long. And she has Peterhausen. He seems busy researching something with senpai, but he gets along with Keena really well for some reason,” replied Akuto as he turned to Hiroshi. It looked like the other boy was in an oddly good mood. “You look happy. And why are you getting so sentimental all of a sudden?”

“Oh, I’m just in that kind of mood.”

Hiroshi stared out the window, but it looked more like he was simply staring blankly into the distance. Even so, he looked a bit flushed. Akuto could make no sense out of it.

—*Well, at least he’s in a good mood.*

All conversation suddenly died out on the bus. The silence between the four of them was not all that awkward, but for some reason Junko was continually looking toward Akuto and then looking away with a horribly nervous look on her face.

“What’s the matter?” asked Akuto when he noticed.

Junko shook her head almost in a panic, mumbled “nothing”, and frantically stuck her hands in her bag.

“I-I was just thinking we could eat something…”

Junko rummaged through her bag. It seemed she could not find what she was looking for because she dug through its contents again and again.

“You are getting too excited,” pointed out Korone who had been sitting silently up to that point.

Junko grew flustered and denied it.

“No, no, no, no, no. I am fine. I am not excited. I am calm. I am perfectly calm.”

“You don’t look calm to me. Are you okay?” asked Akuto as he held a worried hand out toward her.

Junko drew back while letting out a short cry that was halfway in between “Hyah!” and “Pyah!”

“I wasn’t trying to do anything…”

“I-I-I-I know that.”

“Then are you not feeling well?”

“That is not it. Th-this is…”

Junko looked like she wanted to say something, but she soon began mumbling. Korone then cut in.

“If you are having trouble saying it, I can-…”

“No, no, no, no. Th-this is a political matter. A high level one.”

Junko covered Korone’s mouth with her hand.

“A high level political matter?”

Akuto’s expression grew serious. He recalled what Bouichirou had said. It seemed the time had come when he would need to change his way of thinking. Obeying the law and doing the right thing were perfectly natural for him, but he was beginning to understand that might be too narrow a way of thinking.

“I want you to tell me this properly. The time may have come for me to take on a large responsibility,” said Akuto.

Junko blushed and her hand dropped away from Korone’s mouth.

“You…realized it?”

“More or less. I believe I must take responsibility for the sake of the future.”

“A-are you serious?”

Junko’s mouth fell open in surprise, but when Akuto nodded, she could not help but have that mouth loosen carelessly.

“W-well, if you have finally come around, that is fine. If you understand what this is about, there is no need for me to tell you.”

Junko tried to hide her face that would not stop smiling. She brought a hand to her face and pretended to look out the window.

“But I cannot know for sure unless you actually tell me,” pointed out Akuto.

Junko blushed and said, “D-do not make me say it. All that matters is that you understand. And my father will explain everything later.”

—I’m not quite sure what to make of Hattori-san’s expression, but it sounds like an important discussion is coming up.

Akuto kept his mind focused on what Junko had said.

The flying bus slid to a stop in a forest. Hiroshi assumed this was the Iga Village, but a look out the window showed nothing but an area about half the size of a soccer field that had been cleared of all trees.

“Is this the village?” asked Hiroshi.

“No, this is the landing area. The village is about a 20 minute walk from here,” explained Junko.

Junko stepped from the bus and the others followed. A path could be seen leading into the forest from the edge of the clearing. They had not seen it from above because the trees covered it. It did not look like the trees were naturally covering it, so it had likely been intentionally hidden.

“Is the village itself hidden?” asked Akuto and Junko nodded.

The flying bus they had arrived on moved toward one edge of the clearing. The ground that had appeared to simply be covered by trees suddenly opened to either side, creating an entrance to an underground area.

“That is the parking lot,” said Junko.

After swallowing up the bus, the entrance closed once more, leaving only the forest behind. It seemed the village wished to hide everything.

“Amazing,” said Akuto in admiration.

Junko looked embarrassed as she began walking ahead of the others.

“Well, just remember what kind of family this is. The house itself is nothing special.”

The other three followed Junko down the narrow pathway. But then Junko suddenly stopped. Hiroshi was confused, but the others tensed up.

—*Eh? Eh?*

Hiroshi glanced around and heard a high-pitched noise.

—*Eh?*

In his surprise, Hiroshi felt a dull vibration through the bottom of his foot. He looked down to find a cross-shaped shuriken sticking into the ground.

“Waaah!”

Hiroshi belatedly jumped back, but the other three had of course already noticed the attack. Junko had a short sword in hand and Akuto was glaring to the upper right. Even Korone had her hand in her bag from where she stood next to Akuto.

“Eh? What is going on?” asked Hiroshi.

Instead of answering him, Junko shouted, “Yuuko! This is going too far for a prank!”

A voice replied from the forest.

“Ah ha ha ha! Onee-chan, you’re just as skilled as ever.”

Hiroshi tried to look toward the voice, but he could only tell it was coming from the forest. He could not pinpoint the exact location.

“You idiot. What if you hit someone?”

“Don’t worry. I aimed for the chain mail you always wear.”

“That is not what I meant. What if it was deflected into someone?”

“That’s just an issue of your skill.”

Junko spoke with the voice as if it was a normal conversation. It seemed Junko’s younger sister had come to meet them and had suddenly thrown a shuriken at Junko.

“Come on out now.”

“Fiiine.”

After that reluctant response, a tree to the upper right rustled a bit. A girl nimbly jumped up from it and rotated through the air. She landed lightly in front of the four on the path.

The short girl gave a joking bow.

“Nice to meet you. I’m her little sister, Yuuko!”

“Ah!” cried Hiroshi without thinking.

This was unmistakably Hoshino Yuri, the idol he had seen up close the day before.

Noticing his reaction, Yuuko waved toward him.

“That’s right. I’m an idol.”

Hiroshi gave a sigh of relief at her light tone. She did not seem to realize he was Brave.

“Honestly, what a ridiculous little sister. This is what happens when you become a performer. And that is also why you were attacked by demonic beasts,” scolded Junko so the other three could hear.

“That had nothing to do with being a performer. But it was thanks to that that I was rescued by that famous Brave!”

“No matter how much you hate demonic beasts, it is shameful for a member of the Hattori family to be rescued by someone else. What do you think all your training is for?”

“What does it matter? I’m not the head of the family or anything. Dad said I didn’t have to take my non-idol training all that seriously. And Brave was really cool, so what else matters?”

Yuuko stuck her tongue out at Junko. A grin naturally formed on Hiroshi’s face as he listened to that exchange. Being called cool was not a bad feeling. It did not matter if she was talking about when he had a mask on.

“Hey, is this guy your boyfriend?”

Yuuko suddenly moved in front of Hiroshi.

“Eh? Wait…”

Hiroshi panicked, but Junko sharply denied it at the same moment.

“No!”

“Ehh? You don’t have to deny it that strongly. Then it must be this one.”

Yuuko turned toward Akuto.

“Y-you are…still wrong.”

This time, Junko mumbled as she denied it.

“Ehh? But from how you’re acting, it must be him. You’re too easy to understand. But you should stay away from him.”

Yuuko gave Akuto a look of disgust.

“Hey! Do not be so rude!” shouted Junko angrily, but Yuuko was not listening.

“But he’s scary. Both his face and presence. He’s the only person other than those in the village who was able to pinpoint my location.”

Yuuko pointed at Akuto. He had a troubled look on his face.

—*Come to think of it, aniki never looked away from the upper right.*

Hiroshi was shocked when he recalled Akuto’s actions. Akuto would likely have been just as confused as Hiroshi not long ago, but it was growing more and more obvious that he was gradually becoming a true monster.

“Onee-chan, look at him. Why would you marr-…”

Yuuko pouted her lips and started speaking, but Junko suddenly attacked her. She circled around her with ninja speed and held two fingers against Yuuko’s throat to keep her from speaking any further.

“Why would I merrily enjoy being around him? That is what you were trying to ask, right?”

Junko’s words were filled with killer intent. Yuuko nodded like some kind of machine.

“Th-that’s right. Exactly. But onee-chan, this is a killing technique…”

“It is your fault for not avoiding it. Now, let us get to the house,” urged Junko.

They began walking, but Yuuko kept some distance between herself and Junko and Akuto. This led to Hiroshi walking alongside her.

“Hey, what kind of person is he?” boldly asked Yuuko while blatantly gesturing toward Akuto with her chin.

“Asking like that is rude,” said Hiroshi cautiously.

With a standoffish attitude, Yuuko waved her hand as if to say she did not care.

“But he’s scary. He isn’t normal.”

“Well… He is an amazing person.”

“Amazing?”

“He’s powerful. He’s probably the strongest.”

“Ah ha ha. Why do boys always start calling things the strongest?”

“No, it’s true.”

“It is not true. Have you never seen Brave? Now he’s strong. The way he waves his arm real quick like this is so wonderful. And he was so cool when he saved me. He chopped the demonic beast to pieces without holding back!” said Yuuko absentmindedly.

“Wait, weren’t you supposed to keep it a secret that you saw Brave up close?”

“Ehh? But everyone already knows Brave saved me.”

“No, I mean how he fights and things like that.”

“Eh? What does it matter? I don’t even know who he is. The knights asked me a whole bunch of questions, but I can’t tell them something I don’t know. Wait. Why do you know about Brave and me?”

Yuuko began peering closely at Hiroshi.

—*Whoops…*

Hiroshi panicked, but he quickly thought up an excuse.

“They were talking about it on TV. ‘Does Hoshino Yuri know Brave’s secret?’ Stuff like that.”

“Eh? Really? But Brave and I…”

Yuuko suppressed a laugh.

“Eh? What? Do you know something after all?” asked Hiroshi.

Yuuko spread her arms and ran around the area.

“That’s a secret,” she said with a finger on her lips.

—*Sh-she’s so cute…*

Hiroshi was deeply moved. It had likely shown on his face, but Yuuko did not seem to mind. She may have been used to guys looking at her that way. But then she stuck her head right in front of Hiroshi’s face as if she had remembered something. She then stood on her tiptoes.

“Eh?”

Hiroshi’s heart skipped a beat, but Yuuko smiled innocently and spoke.

“You’re about the same height as Brave!”

“Oh…A-am I?”

Hiroshi grew flustered, but it did not seem Yuuko had meant anything by her comment. She moved her face away and began cheerfully walking once more.

“Come on. Enough nonsense,” chided Junko as she pointed down the path. “We are almost to the house. You let everyone in. I will call for father.”

The house was cleverly hidden within the forest. That prevented them from grasping its full structure, but the portion they could see looked like a rather large Japanese-style house. It had no actual gate, but the entrance was surrounded by a wonderful front garden. The entrance was large enough for an entire class to take a commemorative photograph in front of. The roof was covered in black tiles and the house was covered in wood, but the angle the sun would hit with had been calculated out enough for it to glitter beautifully in the sunlight.

Junko headed around to the back of the house. Yuuko casually opened the front door and announced they had visitors. A middle-aged woman in Japanese clothing immediately appeared and bowed.

“Welcome. I am sure you are exhausted. Please come in.”

The servant led the three visitors to the parlor.

Hiroshi attended a prestigious academy, so he was not surprised to see a servant working in a house. However, he could not help but be surprised at how the woman carried herself. Akuto seemed to have noticed it as well, so he exchanged a glance with the other boy.

“Everyone in Hattori-san’s house seems amazingly agile.”

“I know…”

They whispered to each other. Yuuko could not have heard them, but she called out to the servant.

“Hey, is it true the Teruya family is up to something again?”

“Milady, not in front of company,” scolded the servant, but Yuuko was not backing down.

“What does it matter? They’re practically family. Also, onee-chan told me this one has met Teruya Eiko once before.”

Yuuko pointed at Akuto. Akuto looked unsure what to say, but it was true he and Hiroshi had both met Teruya Eiko. Hiroshi had heard the Hattori and Teruya families did not get along then, but he had assumed it was a friendly sort of rivalry.

“Are your two families really on such bad terms?” asked Hiroshi.

Yuuko nodded and said, “It’s always been that way, but it’s been especially bad recently. They’ve been wandering around this area.”

“Are they planning something?”

“Who knows. It could be anything. Hey, come this way.”

Yuuko grabbed Hiroshi’s arm and pulled.

“Eh? Why?”

Hiroshi was confused. He had only just been led to the parlor.

“Leave your luggage here. Oh, you wait here.”

That last comment was directed at Akuto and accompanied with a shake of the head.

Akuto looked troubled, but he had no choice but to continue into the parlor. Korone followed him.

Only Hiroshi was pulled down the hallway by Yuuko.

“Wait, where are we going?”

“It doesn’t really matter, but how about the courtyard? I don’t want to be near him.”

“Don’t say things like that.”

“But…”

Yuuko started to say something, but she changed the subject after opening the sliding glass door to the courtyard, slipping on some sandals, and stepping out onto the grass.

“That guy is marrying my sister, right?”

“Eh?”

That was the first Hiroshi had heard of that.

“I haven’t heard anything about that.”

While in shock, Hiroshi followed her into the courtyard.

“Really? I suppose my sister can be shy about that kind of thing.”

Yuuko sat on a roofed bench in the courtyard. Hiroshi stood in front of her.

“What do you mean marrying?”

“I mean exactly that. I don’t really understand it, but it seems that guy is called the demon king and this marriage will make him more behaved.”

“Can they really decide that so easily…?”

“Hm. It may be hard to understand from a different religion, but our family follows Suhara. Orders from above are absolute. Political marriages are completely possible. The Teruya family’s actions may be because they’re afraid of us gaining more influence.”

“I see.”

Hearing it explained that way made Hiroshi feel it may not be that bad a thing. At the very least, it would resolve a good number of Akuto’s worries.

“I supported this at first, but I don’t like it if it’s with him.”

“Why do you keep saying things like that? He’s a really good person,” protested Hiroshi.

However, the response he got was unexpected.

“He has the scent of a demonic beast.”

—*Eh?*

Hiroshi knew better than anyone that she was not lying. And that was why he was so shocked.

“Y-you can tell?”

“Yes. By scent. I think I’m sensitive to that kind of scent. There’s something about the area around a demonic beast that I really hate. I haven’t told this to many people, but I was almost killed by a demonic beast once.”

Yuuko’s voice was calm, but she must have had some mental resistance. Hiroshi noticed her hands were trembling slightly.

“It happened when I was a kid, but I remember it clearly. The beast was made from some type of bug and it bit me. That was enough to give me a standard phobia, but it was more than that. It seems some of the demonic beast’s mana entered my body. I didn’t actually affect my body, so I’m fine for the most part. But when a demonic beast is nearby…it’s less like I’m afraid of the demonic beast and more like I’m filled with such fear it feels like I’m going to lose my mind.”

Yuuko smiled as she spoke, but her words were a great shock to Hiroshi.

—Come to think of it, I’ve heard that demonic beast mana is normal mana that some sort of error has occurred in. Who knows what would happen if you got that in your body.

Yuuko noticed the serious look on Hiroshi’s face, so she began laughing and waving her hand.

“Ah ha ha ha. Don’t worry. I have a unit inside me from when I was baptized into Suhara, right? That is constantly casting magic on the mana. The demonic beast mana is held in check as it tries to increase. I’ll be fine unless Suhara disappears. But how could that ever happen?”

“I see,” said Hiroshi in relief.

Yuuko then gave him a teasing smile.

“Why are you so worried about me? Do you have some kind of ulterior motive?”

“No, of course not!”

Hiroshi frantically shook his head, but Yuuko’s mischievous expression did not change.

“Is that so? My fans always seem to view me with an image they decided on by themselves. And those that deny it mostly want to see the true me, but in an indecent way. And yet the real me is just a boring person no different from anyone else.”

“N-no, that isn’t true. You’re amazing, Yuuko-san,” said Hiroshi.

Yuuko narrowed her eyes as if he was mocking her.

“A lot of people say that, but that’s what I call having an ulterior motive.”

“No, that’s not it! Despite being born into such a great family, you challenged yourself by trying out all those different things. That’s what I mean when I say you’re amazing.”

Yuuko finally opened her eyes wide in surprise.

“I’ve been called selfish for being from such a rich family, but no one’s ever told me that before. For acting, singing, writing songs, and doing variety shows, I’ve always been called selfish and indecisive.” Yuuko grinned. “But saying I’ve done all that *despite* my family is not quite accurate. It’s the opposite. It’s not that I don’t want to rely on my family or even that I do. I feel that I have to do something for my family. I don’t know if what I’m doing is helping all that much, but that’s what I’m trying to do.”

“You want to do something for your family?”

“If I had not been born in this family, I would have died. This special protection from Suhara is not something just anyone can get. I am thankful for my family. And I don’t mean my parents by that. I mean my good fortune to be a part of this family. This is kind of embarrassing. I’ve never said any of this before.”

Yuuko scratched her head and blushed a little.

“No, I think it’s amazing.”

For some reason, Hiroshi felt embarrassed too, so he scratched at his head as well.

Whether to hide her embarrassment or not, Yuuko’s expression suddenly grew very serious.

“Hey. Do you believe in god?”

“Eh?”

“And when I say god, I mean a real god.”

“That’s kind of a hard question to answer,” said Hiroshi in confusion.

“I know. But believing in Suhara is actually believing in the bonds of everyone supporting Suhara. In other words, it is no different from believing in the bonds of family and the like. However, things like family and the meetings between people are not here due to Suhara’s doing. I think where you are born and the people you meet by coincidence are decided by the real god. That is why I believe in a real god and that is why I work as a performer. I work to create bonds between all sorts of people through my broadcasts. What I find most important is my family, so I intend to truly serve Suhara and obey my family.”

“I have no thoughts as wonderful as that. I am impressed.”

Hiroshi sighed and Yuuko smiled in embarrassment.

“Saying that isn’t going to get you anything.”

“I wasn’t expecting anything.”

Hiroshi smiled, too.

After Yuuko had smiled for a while, she suddenly looked up at Hiroshi with a serious expression.

“But it would’ve been fun if you had a bit of an ulterior motive of wanting to get to know me better.”

—*Eh?*

For an instant, Hiroshi thought on what she meant.

—*Does that mean…?*

Certain hopes swelled up within him and his expression grew serious, but Yuuko’s face quickly grew mischievous.

“After all, anyone who tries to get to know me better has to be tested by everyone living here.”

“What? Everyone living here?”

As soon as Hiroshi spoke that question, he realized he was surrounded by hostile gazes.

He looked around and found people dressed in the ninja outfit of black clothes with a black hood that left only the eyes exposed. They were just about to begin attacking Hiroshi. He wanted to ask where they had come from, but he found his answer shortly thereafter. There had been hidden doors across the courtyard lawn, by the side of the bench, and elsewhere. A few ninja had their heads and feet sticking out of those doors.

“Waaah!”

Hiroshi panicked, but Yuuko smiled.

“People trying to be my friends, my fans, or anyone else who tries to approach me are all taken out by them.”

“Wh-wh-what is going on?”

Hiroshi’s legs were about to collapse underneath him.

“Getting to know me better is the same as becoming a part of the family, so they have to test anyone who wants to be my friend.”

“T-t-test?”

“You attack them with your special technique as they attack you with theirs. If they recognize your power, you’ll be best friends.”

“W-wait! I don’t have a special technique! And these people are clearly not trying to make friends! They’re just hunting down any guy who approaches you!” exclaimed Hiroshi.

The ninja all shook their heads. As they slowly approached Hiroshi, they spoke.

“You want to be our friend, right?”

“We want to be your friend. Let’s test out our techniques on each other.”

“You have some guts approaching the young lady like this.”

“See!? That last comment was clearly a threat! They’re just threatening me!”

When Hiroshi pointed it out, Yuuko gave a bitter smile and rested her head on her hand while sitting on the bench.

“Do you really think so?”

“Yes!”

“I see… All the guys I bring home end up running away. I guess I need someone as strong as Brave.”

Yuuko sighed regretfully.

“I-I-I get it! I won’t do anything!”

As the ninja group slowly approached Hiroshi while filled with killer intent and wielding swords and brass knuckles, he quickly moved back away from Yuuko.

“Sigh… But my dad is the worst when it comes to this. That guy is probably in trouble right about now,” muttered Yuuko.

“Aniki is?”

“Yes. He’s supposed to marry my sister. That really is becoming part of the family.”

“Then is your father attacking him with a weapon right now?”

“Don’t be so rude. He isn’t attacking him; he’s testing his skill and his courage.”

“Isn’t that just a different way of saying the same thing?” complained Hiroshi.

However, he fell silent when he heard swords being drawn around him.

Part 2

Akuto and Korone were left in the parlor, but as guests, they had no choice but to sit quietly. The woman in Japanese clothes who had led them there left them with some tea, but it had started to grow cold after they had only drunk half of it.

“Am I being tested?” Akuto asked Korone.

“Are you? It is hard to tell.”

—*Either way, I need to be careful what I say. I need to keep my guard up.*

While resolving himself, the sliding door opened.

“Welcome. I hear you have been a help to Junko on several occasions.”

Standing beyond the door was a short man who gave off an aura of vitality.

Akuto had not noticed him approach until the door had slid open. Normally, he would have at least heard the footsteps and Akuto was also the person who had seen through Yuuko’s hidden position. It was clear this man was no ordinary person.

He wore Japanese clothing and appeared to be between the ages of 40 and 50. His white teeth stood out on his darkly tanned face. His properly combed down hair was a deep black and very healthy looking. However, he lacked the “lightness” common in men like that. It felt as if he was always wrapped in a dignified yet not uncomfortable atmosphere.

“I am Youzou, her father,” he greeted Akuto who had stood up. He then urged Akuto to sit back down. “I have heard many rumors about you.”

As Youzou sat before Akuto, he gave a carefree smile.

“That is embarrassing to hear. Junko-san has also been a help to me both as the class representative and as someone knowledgeable about the school,” replied Akuto with a bow.

“To get right to the point, do you love Junko?”

Youzou’s statement was akin to a surprise attack.

A normal teenage boy would have had trouble answering that question, but Akuto viewed the word “love” as including every meaning of the word including those outside of romantic love. And on top of that, Akuto was the type of person who would not hesitate to speak his feelings honestly.

“Absolutely,” he replied immediately.

Youzou gave a hearty laugh.

“Ha ha ha ha ! What a pleasant young man. But you know Junko’s position, do you not? Do you know what it means to the Hattori family for you to live with her?”

Akuto was well aware what troubles Junko had gone through in living in the same student dormitory as him and consider him her ally. Also, he had been told this was a political matter.

“I understand that it holds political meaning. It is not merely an issue of feelings. No matter how difficult it may be, I wish to make the decision that is best for Junko-san’s surroundings and family environment.”

Akuto meant every word of it.

However, to someone who heard those words with the assumption of him planning to marry Junko, they could only mean one thing. Youzou smiled. He looked delighted down to the bottom of his heart, but the smile also appeared intimidating to any who saw it.

“As her father, I am pleased to hear those words. But do you mind if I test you to see if you are truly prepared?”

His tone was quiet, but his voice contained enough intensity to cause even some of the most powerful people in history to shrink back.

Even so, Akuto answered calmly.

“I am prepared to be tested.”

“How wonderful are you? I have taken a liking to you as a fellow man.”

As soon as Youzou said that, a dreadful scene appeared before Akuto’s eyes.

While still sitting seiza-style, Youzou jumped up. The power of his leap was frightening. With only the strength of pushing his knees down, he jumped a meter into the air.

—!

Akuto was utterly shocked and he reflexively stood up.

When he did, Youzou drew his sword while still in the seiza-style position in midair. He made a perfectly horizontal strike. Akuto caught the sword with his hand, but this placed nothing but his bare hand in front of the blade. His fingers were severed and flew through the air and the sword travelled directly for his neck.

—I’m dead!

Akuto felt his own death.

—Is this the end…? Wait, why can I still think?

As soon as he realized that, Akuto felt his eyes suddenly open.

He was standing in the middle of the parlor and Youzou was still seated where he had been before. He looked over and saw Korone sitting with the same expression as before. (Not that it would have changed had something happened.)

“Why did you suddenly stand up?” asked Korone.

—That must mean that didn’t actually happen.

Akuto brought a hand to his neck. Nothing was out of the ordinary there.

“An excellent reaction. As to be expected of the one said to become the demon king.”

Youzou slapped his own leg.

Akuto realized Youzou did not even have a sword on him. That made sense. No man would appear before clearly unarmed guests in his house wearing a sword.

“That was…an illusion?” muttered Akuto.

He did not understand how it worked, but he had clearly been shown some kind of illusion. The one thing he did know was that the illusion had felt very real.

—If Youzou-san really did have a sword, he would have been able to do the exact same thing.

Akuto was sure of that.

“That is just a little technique of mine. How did you like it?” asked Youzou.

Akuto detected the implied meaning behind the question.

“That may have been an illusion, but you could produce the same result in reality if you wished, couldn’t you?” asked Akuto.

Youzou grinned and said, “Yes. It is a technique passed down by our family. More sensitive people can die from the mental shock of the illusion alone, but I thought you would be fine. It may seem a bit cruel, but that is just who I am. I cannot help but test people. At my age, you begin to wonder what would happen if you actually tried to attack certain people.”

—So this allows him to detect what would happen without having to actually attack. If the difference in ability is too great, a conflict can be avoided because the result will be obvious. And if the two powers are almost the same, it may not avoid a battle, but he can gain an advantage by subtly adjusting his method of attack during the real thing.

Akuto analyzed the idea behind it. He then continued his thoughts.

—He said it is just who he is, but I doubt he would do something this cruel for no reason. If this is a political issue, it is the same as coming under his supervision. By showing me his superiority, he can prevent me from opposing him.

Akuto sat back down and bowed.

"Well done. I hope we can remain on good terms for many years to come."

"No, raise your head. I simply grew a bit too enthusiastic after hearing you were to become the demon king. Now that I know what a wonderful young man you are, I am the one that hopes we can remain on good terms. It is a pleasure to meet you." Youzou spoke with a pleasant smile, but his eyes suddenly narrowed before he continued. "By the way, what do you think would happen if I truly attacked you? Tell me what you honestly think."

Akuto was taken off guard by that sudden question, but he soon gave an embarrassed smile.

"I doubt you were completely serious in that attack just now, so I cannot say for sure. However, I picked up on at least some of your mannerisms from that. After seeing it once more, I think the result might change."

Akuto spoke so unconcernedly that Youzou's eyes opened wide for an instant. However, he appeared more surprised than angry. Akuto had not realized it, but he had calmly stated that he would willingly let Youzou once more use a technique that might kill him.

Youzou's expression quickly changed to one of delight.

"That settles it. You are a member of the family now. I will have a feast with plenty of sake prepared right away. No, wait. I suppose at your age, you will need tea instead. At any rate, you can eat the very best food this area has to offer. Feel free to relax and enjoy yourself."

—It looks like he's taken a liking to me. Does this mean the Hattori family will act as my guardian from now on? Now I really need to keep up with my studies and become a wonderful politician.

With that carefree thought, Akuto bowed as Youzou left the parlor.

The feast turned out to be a grand event. The dining tables lined up within the tatami-covered hall were piled high with delicacies of both the mountains and seas. At first glance, it appeared to be the simple rural food of a mountain bandit, but a closer inspection showed the food had to have taken a great amount of effort to prepare. The entire family was present as

were all of the ninja living in the house, so a great number of people had gathered in the hall. Someone with as poor an upbringing as Akuto could only liken it to a large company's hot spring trip.

Akuto sat beside Youzou. That was a seat of honor. He had never sat there before, so he did not know how to act.

On Youzou's other side was Junko. She seemed nervous. In fact, she was so nervous that everything she said came out wrong. She trembled so much as she sat that it was amazing her joints were not clattering. Whenever Youzou spoke to her, she did not seem to have been paying attention. Yuuko sat next to Junko. Those were the only four sitting in seats of honor. Hiroshi was sitting at the very back of the room.

From the look of the feast, Akuto decided it too was a test for him. Youzou gave a short speech that was very frank and open, but he then turned to Akuto to make a speech of his own. Akuto was now certain he was being tested.

"Sai Akuto-kun here who is being invited in as a member of the family, so let us hear him introduce himself."

Akuto stood up, but he received no applause from the seated ninja who had removed their masks for the feast. Looks of clear hostility could be seen in their eyes.

—*I see. So I have to win them over, too.*

"From now on, I will be receiving some help from the Hattori family. This may put a burden on all of you. However, I am well aware of how unique I am and what political influence my actions have from that."

As Akuto spoke, all eyes in the room focused on him. Some had been whispering to each other before, but they fell silent as he continued to speak.

"I call this a political influence, but it is a negative power. My actions will undoubtedly anger someone. However, power itself has no intrinsic good or evil to it. The same can be said for influence. So why has this become a negative power? That is because people are being led astray by the public opinions they themselves have created."

An atmosphere of confusion spread as Akuto's speech grew more abstract.

"I say public opinion is the true identity of political power. And so I wish to become one of those who creates public opinion of his own volition. I hope to work to help the Hattori family and to give more honor to its name. I view that as a means of repaying Junko-san."

A stir spread throughout the listeners. Those words meant the boy known as the demon king had obediently surrendered to the Hattori family. However, his aggressive declaration about creating public opinion had been an announcement that he would take part in the political conflict. Anywhere else, that might have been interpreted as the demon king revealing his desire for world domination, but this was the Hattori family. In this warrior faction of Suhara followers, those words were viewed as “promising”.

“Now this is a surprise.”

“I was afraid when I first heard the master was inviting this boy.”

“He seems quite promising. To think Junko-sama has dominated someone on his level.”

Akuto was not sure what to make of that reaction, but he continued his speech regardless.

“I hope to learn the ways of the world here. I will make use of the power the Hattori family provides. However, I will not use the Hattori family for my own self-interest. I am sure some of you will find it difficult to trust me. After all, I belong to a different religion. Nevertheless, I promise to never betray Junko-san.”

Akuto looked over toward Junko.

She was shocked at his look and her spine twitched a bit. A short while later, she finally seemed to grasp what Akuto had said. Her stiff expression grew distorted and she brought a hand to her cheek to hide it. Even so, she could not stop the tears flowing out.

—*W-was she that moved by my speech?*

Akuto had only been trying to make himself look good, so he was surprised she would react that strongly to it. However, the ninja forces gathered for the feast were deeply moved by those tears.

“Oooohhhhh!”

“I wish you happiness!”

“I’ll allow it! I never thought I would say this, but I’ll allow it!”

The stir among the many ninja seated on the tatami mats grew into full-blown shouting. Akuto did not quite understand the effects of his words or the situation as a whole, but he was not given a chance to say anything more as excitement grew at the feast.

Urged on by the sake and appetizers, people began speaking loudly to each other and the feast began with an informal atmosphere.

Ninja after ninja walked up to Akuto while crying, pouring him a drink, and telling him to “make the young lady happy”. As these vague greetings continued on and on, he stopped paying much attention.

Junko’s tears had stopped and she was eating with a happy expression. She cheerfully greeted every ninja who came to greet her. However, she refused to look Akuto in the eye and never looked in his direction.

For some reason, Hiroshi seemed to have hit it off well with the ninja. They were having a lively discussion on idols.

“Again: we’re asking what Lady Yuuko needs to do to get even better sales.”

“That Chisato girl who is doing well lately is getting in her way.

“No, Chisato-chan is the old type of idol,” explained Hiroshi. “She’s the type who will go down in flames with a single scandal about having a boyfriend. The type of idol that loses fans from a boyfriend is the old type that uses her virginity to give her fans illusions of being her lover. Yuuko-chan is different. She has a wild personality and has so many talents, so it would be hard to imagine being her lover.”

The ninja nodded at Hiroshi’s discourse on idols.

“Ohh, that’s an academy student for you.”

“He’s such an intellectual.”

Yuuko had been looking displeased before, but she suddenly proclaimed she would sing and had a karaoke set prepared.

When Yuuko began singing one of her songs, the feast reached its high point.

Akuto was happier than he had ever been before in his life. However, he was oblivious as to why the Hattori family was providing him with such happiness.

Night came. Junko was alone in her room when she was suddenly overcome with anxiety. After the feast, she had quickly felt empty. People often regretted saying something on a whim. This feeling was similar. She began to grow suspicious of how Akuto was acting.

—Am I just imagining this? No, he is definitely acting oddly calm. He often has a bit of a displeased look, but today of all days, it seems he should act a bit embarrassed when teased.

With that weighing on her mind, Junko found it difficult to stay put in her room.

—Is it possible he really is mistaken about this? No, worrying about it will not change anything. I know. I need to check with him. That is what I need to do.

With that thought, Junko stood up.

However…

—But how am I supposed to check? Do I simply ask him if he is prepared to marry me? If he really is, then it will mean I was doubting him. That is worthy of seppuku.

Junko tilted her head in puzzlement. But then an idea came to her. However, she felt oddly flushed as soon as she thought of it.

—He has yet to convert from his religion. That means his doctrines forbid him from d-doing that kind of thing before marriage. If I urge him to do what is only natural for husband and wife, I can tell if he understands the situation or not.

Junko began to leave her room, but her hand stopped on the sliding door.

—But if he goes along with this, we will actually go through it. B-but maybe…that's okay? W-wait, in that case, I need to bathe first…

Junko pulled a change of clothes from her dresser and headed for the bath.

—I seriously doubt it, but am I hoping something will happen…?

As she washed her body in the bath, she looked at herself in the mirror. Her face had an untidy grin on it.

"W-wah… If I do not stay focused, he will start to dislike me," she said out loud.

—N-no, I am not focusing to prevent him from disliking me. B-but…If he really does not know and we end up d-doing it anyway, wouldn't he be forced to marry me then?

That thought caused Junko to blush so much even she thought it was pathetic.

"Th-that is from staying in the bath too long. I need to finish bathing and get out."

Junko began frantically scrubbing her body.

Meanwhile, Akuto lay in the room prepared for him. After taking a bath, he had changed into the T-shirt and shorts he had brought to sleep in, and climbed into the futon.

Akuto was enjoying the silence of the night after the craziness of the feast.

—This is such a happy feeling…but I just can't seem to relax. I get the feeling I'm not cut out for this kind of thing. Maybe I just need more experience with it…

As he thought on that, Akuto suddenly sensed a presence outside the room. He sat up in the futon.

"Who is it?" he asked.

The door slid open and Junko was kneeling on the ground.

—Eh?

Junko was acting differently from normal. Thanks to the moonlight, her bodyline was visible through the thin white kimono she wore to sleep in. However, it was her expression that had surprised Akuto. She was still just as nervous as before, but her slightly flushed cheeks gave off a mature atmosphere.

"Wh-what do you need at this hour?" asked Akuto.

Junko closed the sliding door behind her and spoke with downward cast eyes.

"Don't you know? Or do you really not?"

Her tone of voice was so surprised that Akuto was left confused.

Junko silently walked in. She was wearing just the thin kimono and it had slipped from its proper position a bit. Two white bulges were partially visible where it opened at the chest, so Akuto could tell she was not wearing a bra. As she walked, the hem of the kimono opened wide, revealing her white thigh. Akuto frantically looked away when he realized she might not be wearing any underwear down there either.

"H-hey. It's already late. If you want to talk about something, it could probably wait until tomorrow…"

"O-other people would interrupt tomorrow, right?"

Junko's nervous voice came from right next to Akuto. Due to averting his gaze, he had not noticed that she had sat right in front of him.

He looked back and gasped.

Junko's eyes were wet with tears as if she were afraid. She was opening the chest of her kimono with her own trembling hands.

—*H-huh? Hattori-san is acting different from normal…*

Her behavior confused Akuto.

He could feel a meekness that he had never felt in Junko before.

"You should not force yourself."

Akuto reached out a hand and closed the front of Junko's kimono.

"F-force myself?"

Junko looked up in surprise.

"This isn't like you."

"Wait…"

Junko was at a loss for words.

"Are you perhaps forcing yourself to do something for your family?" asked Akuto.

Junko grew flustered.

"W-wait, what are you-…?"

"This is not how the Junko-san I like acts."

This left Junko dumbfounded. She had no idea what to say, so her mouth simply flapped open and closed.

"Am I wrong? If I enter under the observation of this family, I will have to convert to your religion. However, I have not converted yet. That means doing that kind of thing is forbidden for me. You are not the type of person who would try to get me to break my doctrines like that." As Akuto spoke, Junko's expression visibly clouded over. "S-sorry. That was rude of me. But I want to go about receiving help from this family in the proper way."

Akuto was confused, but Junko suddenly cut in.

"You idiot… I should have known. This is the type of person you are… You have not been told about marrying me, have you?"

—*M-marrying her!?*

Akuto was utterly shocked.

"I apologize. I should have known you would not have come like this if you understood it all… It was my fault for not explaining it to you."

Junko hung her head down.

Akuto frantically placed a hand on her shoulder.

“No, I apologize. It was my fault for not catching on. And you weren’t able to tell me because you were opposed to the marriage, weren’t you?”

“Eh? Hey… Wait a second…”

“I’m sorry. I suppose you can’t just refuse an order from your family. If I had truly been thinking about what was best for you, I should have refused it from the very-…”

Akuto trailed off.

This was because Junko began laughing while still hanging her head down.

“Ha ha… I really am an idiot… And you really are this kind of person through and through…”

“What do you mean by ‘this kind of person’?”

Akuto reached out and raised Junko’s face.

She was crying.

He let go in surprise and she seemed unable to withstand it anymore. She began speaking while sobbing.

“I mean… I mean this kind of person… I got so worked up over this on my own…”

Junko blushed and brought together the front of her disheveled kimono. She then curled up and broke down crying.

“Please forget everything about today,” she said.

“I-I’m sorry, too. B-but…”

Akuto was unable to finish speaking. This was because a spear suddenly fell down from the ceiling.

Akuto’s reflexes were enough for him to avoid it, but the spear would have pierced straight through his heart had he not. It had obviously been meant to kill him.

—*Wah!*

Akuto jumped back. And it did not end there. Spear after spear shot toward Akuto from the ceiling, from below the tatami mats, and from behind the sliding door.

As he avoided the uninterrupted flow of spears stabbing toward him, Akuto managed to make his way out of the room. He turned around in the courtyard and assessed the situation.

It turned out there was not much to figure out. Every possible place to hide around the room Akuto had been given contained several mask-wearing ninja.

“You made the young lady cry!”

“You bastard! You were planning to deceive the Hattori family this entire time!”

The ninja started yelling at him.

“You’re mistaken! And why were you spying on us!?” shouted back Akuto.

However, he did actually feel responsible this time. He had no choice but to leave.

“Hattori-san, I’m sorry!”

Akuto grabbed his change of clothes from next to the pillow, climbed the wall surrounding the house, and ran into the forest.

“On the dignity of the Iga ninja forces, we will not let him escape!”

“Ohhhh!”

He could hear shouts pursuing him.

—I reflexively ran away, but I need to get captured and make a proper apology.

There was no way he could lose so many pursuers in unknown territory like this. Akuto began thinking about how to get captured by them without either side suffering any injuries.

But he was not given time to think. One of the faster pursuers approached while leaping from tree branch to tree branch. He leaped toward Akuto to cut him down from behind.

—Kh!

Akuto turned around and tried to resist with magic. But before he could, the ninja suddenly disappeared into the darkness.

“Eh?”

Akuto was confused for an instant, but he quickly spotted the ninja again and realized what had happened. The ninja attacking him was hanging upside down with a rope wrapped around his foot. He had fallen into a trap.

—A trap? Here?

This was on the Hattori family’s land. No one living in the house would have set that trap. That meant someone else was located nearby.

While looking around for some mysterious figure to appear, Akuto sensed traps activating all over the place. He could hear countless ninja crying out. They had let their guard down as they were so close to the Hattori house, so they were angry that they had fallen for traps they normally would not have.

But they finally put their guards up and the presences of those ninja quieted down. As if waiting for that moment, a shadow slid smoothly out in front of Akuto.

“Who’s there?”

Akuto took a defensive stance and received a familiar voice in response.

“Is that any way to greet me? I let you get away, didn’t I?”

The individual who took a step out of the darkness grinned and thrust a finger toward Akuto.

It was a girl with long hair in a ponytail. Her name was Teruya Eiko.

“So it’s you.”

Akuto maintained his defensive stance.

Eiko smiled cruelly.

“You don’t have to be so cautious. If it wasn’t for me, you would be slaughtering those ninja right about now. You should thank me. My traps are non-lethal after all.”

“Thank you? The timing here was a little too good. It doesn’t add up even if you were trying to get me indebted to you. Have you been observing me all this time?”

“That’s right. I can’t speak about this too loudly, but the Hattori family has some Teruya spies in it.”

“Then you know everything that happened?”

“Of course! Oh, that was hilarious. She took it so seriously!”

Akuto did not like how Eiko was smiling.

“Then what do you want with me? If you don’t need anything, I would like for you to leave after I thank you. Once the ninja calm down, I can likely manage to speak with them.”

Once Akuto said that, Eiko gave a servile yet unpleasant smile.

“No, no. There’s nothing to be angry about. I will tell you exactly what I want, so will you come by my house?”

“Your house?”

“The Teruya house. Our status is higher than the Hattori family, so it should suit you even better.”

“I don’t think so,” replied Akuto without hesitation.

But Eiko refused to back down.

“Even if you were a bit mistaken, you still tried to get on the Hattori family’s good side. But the Teruya family would be more convenient for your purposes.”

“I was not trying to get on their good side. I was trying to grow.”

“That’s just saying the same thing in different ways. Hey, how about you stick with me for a bit? I’m about to make a gamble that should have a nice payoff.”

“What kind of way is that to put it? It makes you sound like a delinquent. I don’t like it.”

Akuto revealed his discomfort, but Eiko’s statement was a shocking one.

“Did you know my father is the high priest? And did you know that high priest carries out assassinations?”

—*What?*

Akuto doubted his ears.

“He kills people the god Suhara views as dangerous. Even if the person has yet to do anything, they will be killed if they are putting together a plan to rebel.”

“That’s all the more reason for me to dislike the Teruya family.”

Akuto’s expression and voice grew stiff.

But Eiko raised a finger and waved it right and left with a calm expression.

“Don’t jump to conclusions. The Teruya family will change if you join it.”

No matter what she said, Akuto had no reason to go along with Eiko’s invitation.

“I already refused your offer. I have my own ideas of what I want to do. I have gained friends and a lifestyle I want to protect while at the academy. That is what I want,” declared Akuto.

Eiko’s expression grew stern.

“Are you defying me?”

“Defying you? This is just you approaching me and going on about nonsense.”

“Dammit. You really are stubborn! Ahh, and I only came to make this invitation because I thought I really could fall in love with you! Hmph. Do what you wish. Those friends and that lifestyle will be gone before long anyway!” stated Eiko emotionally.

“What did you say?”

Akuto’s shoulders twitched at the danger he felt in those words.

A brutal smile appeared on Eiko’s face.

“One of those friends you mentioned is that stupid redhead, right?”

“What do you mean by that?”

Akuto’s expression grew twisted.

Eiko burst out laughing.

“Ah ha ha ha! I told you my family carries out assassinations, right? For some reason, the target this time is that redhead! Hilarious, right? I don’t see how that stupid girl could be anything but harmless!”

“Damn you!” shouted Akuto, cutting off Eiko’s laughter.

“Hyah!”

Eiko let out a short scream and stopped moving.

Hot air swirled around. Akuto’s body was emitting heat. He was pouring energy into the mana around him and the heat that could not be completely eliminated began boiling the mana inside his body.

“W-wait! I’m not the one doing it! If I was, I would hardly come tell you,” argued Eiko as a cold sweat appeared on her brow.

“Then why did you tell me this?”

Akuto’s question was a very forceful one. Eiko must have instinctually known she was faced with someone overwhelmingly more powerful than herself because she obediently answered.

“B-because I thought it would work out well if you helped me out! I think what the Teruya family is doing is wrong,” said Eiko in the tone of someone begging for her life.

“Say whatever you want. Now, move. I’m headed back to the school.”

Akuto waved his hand and a hot wind blew through. That wind forced Eiko to clear a path for him.

But a different voice called out from behind Akuto as he began to move past her.

“W-wait a second! Why did you even come to our house!?” shouted Yuuko.

It seemed she had finally caught up to him. She must have begun pursuing him when she heard the commotion.

Akuto turned around.

“There is something I must apologize for, but that must come later.”

“D-don’t be so selfish… You’re horrible! My sister was crying. What did you do?”

Yuuko had plenty of force behind her words, but her expression was that of someone desperately fighting fear. It seemed her body was reacting to the waves emitted from his body.

“That was my fault. I will speak with all of you later. It seems I was wrong at a fundamental level,” said Akuto, but Yuuko did not back down despite trembling in fear.

“You don’t need to speak with us! Don’t ever come back!”

When he heard that, Akuto could not help but turn to face Yuuko.

“I admit I was wrong. But if what I heard here is true, I do not think I can forgive Suhara. I will decide whether I can ever come back here or not after I check on this.”

Akuto turned toward Eiko with a harsh look in his eyes.

“O-of course it’s true!” Eiko frantically jumped up into the trees. “Well, I will be leaving now. You can handle everything else!”

Eiko ran off, but she had a smile on her face as she did so. It was as if everything had gone according to plan.

Yuuko’s expression twisted in both fear and confusion. Yuuko had apparently heard the end of Akuto’s conversation with Eiko, so she shook her head.

“I don’t know anything about any assassinations! And this is the Teruya family’s doing, right?”

“And so you say it has nothing to do with you? Or are you saying Teruya Eiko made this up?” asked Akuto.

He received a response from another voice approaching behind him.

“It appears to be true. I heard the conversation and it is possible an assassination order has been issued for Keena-san.”

Akuto and Yuuko turned around toward the voice.

Korone was standing there and Hiroshi was with her.

“It is possible?” asked Akuto to double check.

Korone nodded and said, “I directly asked the god, but received no response. Normally, that would be impossible. My questions must receive some form of response, yet on this issue alone the god remains silent,” explained Korone calmly.

“Then is it true that this god requests assassinations?”

Akuto’s anger rose to the surface. It was enough for Hiroshi to flinch back, but Korone remained perfectly calm.

“It is certainly true that assassination orders are given. However, those assassinations are only directed at terrorists on the verge of carrying out an attack. As Fujiko-san’s continued existence proves, not even black magicians are made targets of assassination.”

“Then why is Keena being targeted?”

“I do not know. This is the first time this has happened in my artificial life. This lack of a response must mean the god has some reason for not responding. In that case, it is possible this god has made some sort of mistake,” declared Korone.

“If it isn’t a mistake, this god must have developed an ego. Either way, I can’t just let this happen.” Akuto waved toward Korone. “Please transport me to the school. I need to rescue Keena.”

However, Korone shook her head.

“Are you mistaken about something?” She spread her arms to tell him not to go. “I am your observer and a messenger of the god Markt. One of my roles is to deal with any illegal actions you take. I cannot assist you.”

As Korone spoke, Akuto could not read anything from her expression.

“Illegal actions?”

Akuto walked toward Korone.

“Yes. Wrong or not, the decision of a god is absolute. Please obediently remain with the Hattori family.”

Akuto and Korone faced each other.

“And if I say I’m going anyway?”

“I will not allow it. I will do everything in my power to stop you.”

As she spoke, Korone stuck a hand in her bag. She pulled out a giant laser cannon as tall as she was. She easily lifted it up, rotated it around once, and aimed it with the strap over her shoulder.

“I possess plenty of combat ability. I am strong, you know?”

“I…do not want to do this…”

Akuto began to prepare himself for a fight, but Korone made her move first.

However, her action was quite slow. She walked up to Akuto and hugged him. This was the loose embrace of a lover.

“Now I have captured you. You are unable to move, correct?”

Korone raised her head and Akuto saw the look in her eyes. This was not her usual expressionless look. He could tell there was a hidden meaning to this embrace. Her eyes seemed to say, “You understand, don’t you?”

“You cannot escape. I did not even have to use any weapons,” stated Korone plainly.

Korone was short enough that her arms were wrapped around Akuto’s abdomen. This left his arms free.

“Thank you,” he said.

Having his arms free in this position meant he could reach Korone’s butt.

“Why are you thanking me?” asked Korone in feigned ignorance.

Akuto reached inside Korone’s skirt.

“Ah!” cried out Korone.

Akuto hesitated for an instant, but he realized this was her usual joke. He searched for her tail with his fingers and then pulled it.

With a slight hum, Korone’s eyes grew blank. She had been deactivated. A L’Isle-Adam’s tail acted as its switch.

Akuto opened Korone’s arms, removed her from his body, and sat her on the ground.

“A-aniki…”

Hiroshi cautiously spoke up from where he had been watching the exchange.

“What is it?”

“W-well… If that is true, it really is bad. But even if you do manage to save Keena, what then?”

Akuto was unable to answer Hiroshi’s question. He did not know the answer himself. But Yuuko gave an answer.

“It will mean you opposed the Teruya family. It will mean you opposed Suhara. If that happens, the Hattori family will be in trouble!”

“Th-that’s right. That’s what I’m worried about,” said Hiroshi.

“That’s why I told you to cut all ties with my family and never come back!” shouted Yuuko emotionally.

Hiroshi moved in between Akuto and Yuuko. He hesitantly but firmly spoke to the two of them.

“No, don’t do that. There has to be a better way. Aniki, remember what you said about having everything turn out well? For example, what if someone whose mana couldn’t be detected rescued Keena-chan?”

“Are you talking about Brave?” asked Akuto as he looked down on Hiroshi. “I can’t place my hopes on her being rescued by someone whose actions we can’t predict. And Brave eliminated that one villain. I saw it with my own eyes. He also kills demonic beasts. That’s no different than Suhara’s method of killing rebels in advance. I do agree that there has to be a better way. But I can’t rely on Brave.”

Now it was Hiroshi’s turn to grow emotional.

“But isn’t that how it works for the powerful? If they’re going to protect their family and those close to them, they have to defeat the people trying to harm those people. You’re just planning to sacrifice the class rep to protect Keena-chan!”

“No, I’m not. I’m finally beginning to understand what it is I can do and what it is I should aim for.”

Akuto moved away from Hiroshi.

“Wait, aniki! You can’t go!” shouted Hiroshi. “If you stay here, this will all work out! So…!”

Akuto did not listen to his requests. He continued walking away from Hiroshi.

“For one, what good is walking going to do you!? You’ll never make it in time! For once, you’re wrong, aniki! Didn’t you know that you’re the one activating the demonic beasts?”

That last statement brought Akuto to a halt.

“That’s also why Yuuko-chan is so afraid of you. She has demonic beast mana in her body! It’s running rampant because of you, aniki!”

As soon as Hiroshi said that, he realized he should not have said it. He shut his mouth, but it was too late.

Akuto turned a sorrowful look toward Hiroshi and spoke to him.

“Then you protect her. There is something it seems I must do. I have finally realized that. I have to go.”

Akuto began walking once more.

“Why won’t you listen to what I’m trying to tell you!?” shouted Hiroshi.

However, he did not pursue Akuto. Yuuko was suffering and she had finally crouched down on the ground. Hiroshi held her in his arms and trembled in fear. Black veins were sticking out along her neck. The mana was clearly out of control.

“Aniki!” called out Hiroshi.

Akuto stopped.

But not because of Hiroshi’s cry.

“And I had honestly taken a liking to you. I suppose it was fate that this had to happen.”

A deep voice came from the darkness ahead of Akuto.

Hattori Youzou stepped forward. He was wearing his battle clothing, but he was smiling gently.

“No father can remain silent when both of his daughters are in tears. I hope you are suitably prepared.”

“I apologize for that. However, I cannot follow the Hattori family if you knew about the assassinations,” said Akuto.

The smile disappeared from Youzou’s face.

“Your thinking is too childish. Hiroshi-kun’s argument was more mature than yours. We can only live in peace if someone takes care of the dirty jobs.”

“There is a way to solve this at a fundamental level…or at least I feel there is. If this is fate, then it is doing an excellent job of leading me around. I must go.”

“Adults do not hope for a fundamental solution. Even if the god is wrong in this case, we will begin thinking about what to do once the mistake has been proven.”

“Would you say the same thing if that mistake would mean the death of one of your children?”

“I have had enough of your immature words. This is what it means to ensure the continued existence of your family and society as a whole. Even if civilization advances…no, *because* civilization has advanced, people must follow the values of family and bloodline. Otherwise, society could never last.”

“When those values become a religion, it only causes conflict.”

“Secularism has destroyed society’s values and killed people much more efficiently than religion. But that is enough debate. I have sent back everyone else from the family. This is between the two of us.”

Youzou grinned.

“You live in a society where you are free to kill me here, don’t you?” asked Akuto.

“Unfortunately, I do. However, you are the one that made the mistake here. You should have become a member of the family.”

“I will continue doing this my way. I will make sure you stand aside.”

Akuto prepared himself for a fight.

Chapter 3: A Truly Amazing Birthday

In the past, Constant Magic Academy had been a fortress. However, the remains of that were only located underground. The school building had been built after the war. This left a labyrinth of trenches underground, but the buildings were not constructed to withstand attacks.

That was why Teruya Keizou had assumed this job would be easy. He also had a perfect map of the academy and the plans for its defenses. He had not even needed to obtain them through illicit means. The openly available information was enough.

“Let us synch our clocks in 3, 2, 1…”

Keizou hid behind the academy with three subordinates. The group of four was wearing ninja outfits. The outfits were made of a cloth that did not react to mana well, so it would hide them from any sensors that were not too sensitive. The dark brown color of the outfits was less about mana detection and more about making them visibly difficult to see during the night.

They synchronized their clocks and checked on the blades hidden within their clothes. They were using classic equipment for a classic strategy, but it was the most effective method for assassination.

Keizou’s subordinates were made up of a man who was frighteningly tall and thin, a man whose eyes were opened exceedingly wide where they could be seen through his mask, and a man who was extremely short and round. Keizou gave a short instruction to one of those unique men.

“Eye, double check the route.”

The man referred to as Eye was of course the one with the large eyes. He nodded and jammed his own fingers into his right eye. Anyone who saw that would want to hold a hand to their eye. He gouged out his own eyeball with his fingers.

But Eye did not seem to be feeling any pain. Surprisingly, he flicked the eyeball away with his finger. It fell to the ground and rolled a short distance before jumping up.

The eyeball grew small legs. A thin thread extended from the back of the eyeball. This was an optic nerve. It connected back to the man’s empty eye socket.

Eye gestured with his hand as if giving instructions to a small animal. The eyeball then ran forward, dragging the optic nerve with it. This appeared to be a reconnaissance method allowing the man to view a distant area without sending out mana. If he had used mana, his opponent would find it much easier to detect him. The eyeball kept the mana disruption to an absolute minimum, so detection could be avoided.

The eyeball walked along and began climbing up the school building's drain spout. It reached a window allowing air in at the top of the first floor and entered inside through it.

After a while, Eye gave a report to Keizou.

"The security has indeed been changed. One of the patrolling surveillance devices passed by at a different time than scheduled. Should I fit this to a standard security pattern and estimate the overall schedule?"

Eye displayed a map and security pattern on his clock and held it out toward Keizou. A glance at that was enough for Keizou to see through the academy's security.

"They are not using a standard pattern. They just want us to think it is one. They have likely increased the number of security devices and put them on a random pattern. They have thought this through."

Keizou now gave an instruction to the short, round man.

"Bag, prepare four dummy surveillance devices."

The man referred to as Bag slid his mask up and stuck a hand in his mouth. When he pulled his hand out, a flying surveillance device that resembled a bird came with it. It was about the size of a small bird, so it was too large for someone to normally fit in their mouth. However, Bag continued pulling them from his body until he had four. This was an object transportation method developed so as not to be detectable by mana. Bringing out items using a system like Korone's bag emitted large amounts of mana into the surrounding area.

"Snake, set the dummy surveillance devices on Route B. Begin the operation five minutes after finishing."

The tall, skinny man referred to as Snake grabbed the surveillance devices Bag had produced. He lay on the ground and moved forward by undulating his body just like a snake. He moved as quickly as a sprinter. He reached the school building in no time at all and began ascending the vertical wall just by undulating his body. All of their actions were developed so as not to emit mana, so his ability to stick to the wall must have been a permanent alteration to his body. Snake pressed his head against the small window

that was no more than a gap, too small for a human. When he stuck his head into it, his supposedly hard skull grew disfigured as it squished into the small gap. Snake's body seemed to be soft and elastic because his body returned to its original shape once he made his way inside.

The surveillance devices in his hand were too big to fit through the small window, but Snake stretched his body out, reached a normal window with his mouth, and unlocked it from within using just his mouth.

Unlocking the window would of course alert the security devices. However, Snake quickly brought the dummy devices in through the window. The dummy devices flew into the air and attacked the real devices that had flown in to check on the opened window. The dummies attacked the real ones, inserted their beak-like instruments, and stole their data. The real ones lost functionality and fell to the floor. The dummies calmly began transmitting false data. (Not that they had emotions.) The security supervisor would see it as nothing more than a common misreport.

Snake crawled through the school's hallway on his own. Eye's eyeball followed along behind him.

"Continuing down Route B as planned," reported Eye.

Eye's body was still standing next to Keizou, so he could maintain their link with Snake. They were an invincible team when it came to assassination.

"The target is currently in the lounge on the school building's top floor. She has not moved," reported Bag as he watched the monitor of a mana sensor he had pulled from within his body.

They were tracing Keena's actions. Keena was the only human reading on the top floor. Snake was approaching her, but he did not show up on the sensor.

Snake had swapped out the security devices meant for the designated spot with dummies. After confirming that, Eye reported to Keizou.

"The surveillance devices have been swapped out for dummies. Snake has given the sign. Beginning the countdown."

"We begin in five minutes," instructed Keizou.

Eye had his eyeball return, Bag and Keizou began moving to their hiding spot, and Snake hid below a fire hose box at the edge of the lounge.

Snake surveyed the lounge. It was an area prepared so students could relax while looking up at the sky. A good number of tables and chairs had been prepared. A drink server stood against the wall, but it was not currently running.

His target, Keena, sat at one end of a table with a bottle of tea and a bento box in front of her. She was looking up at the night sky through the glass ceiling. One would have thought she would be bored with no one else around, but she had candles sticking into the white rice inside the bento box. The next day was the birthday she had decided on for herself. She would occasionally look over at the clock. She seemed to be planning to celebrate on her own at exactly midnight.

In a complete coincidence, Snake had finished placing the dummy surveillance devices at exactly 11:55. Their operation was set to begin at precisely midnight.

At thirty seconds ahead of time, Snake began moving from his hiding spot. This time, he would be the one to directly carry out the assassination. On Eye's guidance, Keizou and Bag would avoid the security, prepare for Snake's escape on the roof, and await any unforeseen circumstances. For the moment, everything was progressing well. By morning, nothing but Keena's corpse would be left.

After ensuring he was not being given the sign for an emergency escape, Snake began slithering between the legs of the chairs and tables. He slowly approached Keena's legs. He checked the time once more.

It was 11:59:50.

Snake began the countdown.

As he faced Youzou, the aura around Akuto had clearly changed. Akuto was a different person than he had been even a few minutes before.

"At your age, people can change to a surprising extent given the opportunity, but you take that to an entirely different level," commented Youzou.

Akuto's change manifested itself in the mana swirling around him. It had started out calm, but his anger had caused it to explosively increase. It was currently calming down once more, but the total amount of energy had not dropped. With that calm anger storing up within his body, even the slightest change to his emotions would cause tension to run through the air around him. Not only did this make him difficult to approach, but the tension was so great it seemed as if it would cut you if you so much as touched it. Both he and Youzou possessed great energy within themselves.

"Perhaps we should say you have awakened."

Youzou's tone was light and he was smiling. Even so, obvious tension was leaking from every part of his body.

Akuto gave no response. A new expression that resembled calm could be seen on his face.

"I may have aided in the birth of a monster. However, adults cannot back down after involving themselves in something."

Youzou drew his sword. His eyes opened wide.

But Akuto began moving forward all the same.

Youzou began moving as well.

"Hattori Style – Scattered Moonlight!"

With that spirited cry, Youzou's body split into two. This was the same technique Junko specialized in. However, this was likely the original version. This far outdid Junko's copy technique. This copy did not act the same as the original. In Junko's version, some idiosyncrasies would remain in the movements. This led the copy and the original to take the same actions. However, Youzou's copy took the actions of a completely different person.

"Kiaaaaahh!"

The two Youzous carried out a perfect attack. They did not both attack at once. Their slashes came with a slight gap. This was more dangerous than a simultaneous attack. There were times when a swordsman would seem to be attacking from above but instantly change the strike to one from below. In this case, an attack truly came from above and a second came as if to sweep his feet out from under him. And just to be absolutely certain, the attack from above waved about in the air partway through. This motion transformed the slash to a stabbing attack and would have also knocked an opponent's sword down. That single attack functioned as a feint all on its own. Also, the attack from below was not just a sweeping slash. It changed to a mid-level attack toward the left flank partway through, but he then adjusted his grip to a backhanded one just before it struck. This changed the motion yet again to a swipe down the legs while drawing the blade back. Even two simultaneous attacks with different timing could be dealt with by stopping them as Akuto continued to advance, but this combination was inescapable.

Akuto chose to block the attacks while continuing to advance. He saw through the first attack's feint and succeeded in stopping the hilt of the sword on his mana-strengthened upper arm as the sword was swung down. However, that prevented him from dealing with the lower attack. He held

out an arm to block the attack against his side, but the sword changed its trajectory as if mocking him. It then cut sharply into his foot. Blood sprayed from his heel.

But Akuto did not cry out. Nor did Youzou declare his victory.

“So that is how you choose to handle this.”

Youzou still stood with his sword drawn. Akuto was still standing facing him.

The attack with a copy had been an illusion shown by Youzou.

“It seems you cannot use detailed techniques. You specialize in strengthening your physical body with mana. However, it appears you can only strengthen the areas you are focusing on. If I strike you enough times, the sword wounds on your body will gradually increase. You will eventually die of blood loss,” warned Youzou.

Akuto remained silent.

“And I will not necessarily repeat the same attacks. I have plenty of different patterns. If you are misled by that illusion and I change my attack method, you will never be able to defend against my attacks. I do not want to kill you, so could you change your mind about this?” asked Youzou.

Finally, Akuto opened his mouth to speak.

“I have already made up my mind. I finally see what I must do. I will not back down.”

His tone of voice contained solid determination.

“That is unfortunate,” said Youzou as he raised his sword. “This time, it will be no illusion.”

Before he had even finished speaking, Youzou created a copy of himself. He may have been trying to not give Akuto a moment to think because he immediately began his next attack.

Just as Youzou had warned, his attack method was different. His first attack was from above. This was the same as in the illusion. Akuto once more continued forward and stopped it on the hilt. However, the copy’s actions were different. The strike toward the side still changed, but he let go with his right hand to support the sword only by the end of the hilt and the sword’s trajectory changed such that it slipped by Akuto’s arm as he tried to stop the sword at that earlier stage. After the sword slipped past Akuto’s arm, Youzou’s copy reversed his left wrist and brought the blade up for an attack from above on the opposite side.

Akuto could not defend against both the attacks from above.

In a flash, the point of the sword drew an arc of blood behind it.

Akuto's head flew up into the air.

His body remained standing, but after a fountain of blood shot out of the splendid horizontal slice through his neck, the body swayed and collapsed to the ground.

"I did not want to kill you," muttered Youzou.

He cancelled the copy and sheathed his sword as Akuto's head fell to the ground. The head stared up into the sky with a look of agony.

"If you had not been so stubborn, you could have lived."

Youzou picked up the head.

"I am only so stubborn when it is something I must do no matter what."

Youzou was utterly shocked. He was a man who was rarely surprised, but his eyes opened wide now. Akuto's severed head had spoken.

"Nh!"

The human body could be altered to a great extent using mana, but it was unthinkable to survive as nothing but a head. This was an example of frightening vitality.

Youzou threw the head into the air and tried to slice it in half with his sword, but his swift strike stopped before it reached the head.

"!"

An even greater surprise left Youzou at a loss for words. Someone had grabbed onto him from behind. Akuto's headless body had stood up and circled around behind him.

Youzou's face then twisted in fear. He heard a metallic noise that reflexively caused a chill to run down his spine. He looked over and learned what had caused the noise. Akuto's severed head had grabbed onto the blade of the sword with its teeth.

The severed head moved its teeth to crawl along the blade. Youzou was frozen in place and could only watch on as this eerie sight continued. Akuto's head made it to the sword guard and looked up at Youzou with eyes lacking any emotion. In the next instant, it leapt straight toward Youzou's throat.

"Ahhh!"

A cry escaped Youzou's mouth. Akuto's teeth were piercing his throat. Blood sprayed from Youzou's carotid artery and he could feel the blood leaving his head at a tremendous rate.

Youzou felt his own death.

"I have to admit, that was in poor taste," said Akuto's severed head.

Those words brought Youzou back to his senses.

Akuto stood before Youzou. His head was attached to his body.

"It can't be!"

Youzou trembled.

"Didn't I tell you the outcome might change if I saw it again?" said Akuto calmly.

"It was not my martial arts you wanted to see again? It was the illusion technique itself!?"

Youzou could not bring himself to say any more.

Unlike most other secret techniques, the illusion technique was made to be shown to one's enemy ahead of time. The idea that the Hattoris could use that illusion technique would lead their enemies astray. It was not made so that one could learn how to use it just by seeing it used.

But Akuto had managed to use it after seeing it only twice. And he had done so on a level that not even Youzou had noticed.

"The word talent is not enough for this. You were simply born this way, weren't you?" said Youzou blankly.

"I do not know. At any rate, I do not want to kill you. Please allow me to pass by," said Akuto quietly.

Youzou shook his head.

"I cannot allow that. Doing so would be betraying the role given to me. But I do know I cannot defeat you. I must do this, but I cannot lose my life either. Now, how am I to solve this contradiction?"

Youzou smiled as he said that, but he could not take a single step. Youzou had realized why Akuto had shown him such a cruel illusion. A man like Youzou was always prepared for death. The one thing he feared while fighting was that those he killed would curse him. Akuto had seen through that and rendered Youzou unable to move. Youzou too was the type of person who disliked cruel battles. Akuto had realized that. Showing him such a cruel illusion was a way of implicitly saying he did not want to fight.

“That contradiction is based in your faith, is it not? Your greatest mistake was adding the story of faith on top of what is nothing more than a system. And that contradiction can easily be solved here. If I run away, it solves everything.”

Akuto placed a hand on a nearby tree.

Suddenly, the surface of the tree began to change. It had been a completely normal tree, but as he began pouring ominous mana inside, it began to turn black. Before long, pieces of wood covered in a sticky liquid scattered about the area as a split one meter tall opened in the tree. The giant maw of a demonic beast had appeared on the tree’s surface.

“Why did I know I could do this? I didn’t just a few moments before,” muttered Akuto in wonder.

He then stuck a foot inside that maw. His leg merged with the darkness spreading within the tree. It seemed to be a type of magical teleportation.

Youzou and Hiroshi, who was looking after Yuuko, had both realized what Akuto was doing.

Hiroshi shouted toward Akuto's back.

"Please wait! Are you going to betray everyone? Even the class rep?"

Akuto replied without turning around.

"I am not betraying her. I am merely fulfilling my role in the story everyone has created. If I don't do this, the story of faith will never end."

Finally, Akuto disappeared into the tree and the tree's creepy mouth closed.

In the academy lounge, Snake slithered quickly between the table and chair legs to reach Keena's legs.

It was exactly midnight.

Snake grabbed Keena's leg with his left hand. At the same moment, Keena struck the match she planned to use to light the candles sticking into her bento box's white rice. This saved Keena's life.

She dropped the lit match on Snake's hand when he grabbed her leg.

"Kyah!"

"Tch!"

The match's fire was not that great a danger. However, the surprise caused Snake's left hand to slip. He had tried to pull Keena down to the ground, but she managed to stand up instead.

"Kyaah! What? What?"

Keena jumped back and kept away. The chair toppled backwards and made a loud noise.

Snake had failed to kill his target without causing a commotion, but he was not going to let the job end in a complete failure. He quickly stood up, held an assassin's kunai in his right hand, and silently leaped toward Keena.

Keena was not even given time to turn invisible. He covered her mouth with his left hand to keep her from crying out any further. Snake circled around behind Keena using the same bent whip-like motions he had used to slither across the floor. And he lifted up Keena's chin. Her white windpipe was now exposed.

"A-chan, help!" she tried to call out, but her voice could not escape.

Snake showed cruelly little concern for her futile resistance as he tried to bring the sharp blade of his kunai up to her throat like a razor.

But in that exact instant, Snake's body was torn away from Keena. The hand holding the kunai had been pulled with tremendous force.

"Ohhh!!" shouted Snake.

Just from having his hand swung around, his body was brought up into the air and rotated around. Snake had never before encountered strength of this level. And after being swung around to the side, his right hand was suddenly freed from that grip that felt it would crush his hand. Snake flew, knocking away some of the lounge's tables as he did, and then rolled along the floor.

"A-chan!" cried out Keena in delight before turning around.

But she did not find Akuto there.

"Eh? Why?" said Keena in doubt.

It was Yamato Bouichirou standing there. His face held a smile that would make anyone feel they could trust him. That expression simultaneously gave off a sense of both strength and kindness.

"I came to save you. It saddens me to hear you ask why," replied Bouichirou.

He placed a hand on the waist of his white clothes. A single sword hung there. He drew it with an elegant motion. This extravagant and elegantly made Western-style sword glittered in the starlight.

Snake realized their plan had failed. Bouichirou had definitely appeared using some form of magical teleportation. He did not know how word of their plan had gotten out, but they could only flee now that it had failed. If all of them escaped, they could play dumb as to who had put together this assassination plot.

After making sure he could move, Snake swiftly turned around. He slithered away while weaving his way between the scattered tables. Fleeing was one more thing that Snake excelled at. Whether they could use flight magic or teleportation, no one could follow him if he made his way into a space too small for anyone else to fit.

Snake brought his fingers to his mouth and whistled to inform the others the plan had failed and they needed to flee. He then made his way toward the garbage chute on one end of the lounge. Fortunately, the scattered tables filled the area directly in front of the garbage chute. No matter how fast this man might be, he could not capture Snake.

But Snake's eyes opened wide when he brought his hand up to the garbage chute.

His hand was indeed on the garbage chute, but that hand was not moving. No matter how much he tried to pull, it would not move. The reason for this was quite simple: His arm had been severed at the shoulder.

Snake did not even feel any pain. He checked behind him. The table hiding him had been sliced in two. It was a splendid cut. It was as if the table had been a styrofoam miniature sliced with a hot knife. Snake looked over at the stump of his own arm. He had never before seen a cut like that. The arm was perfectly intact other than the cut. It looked like a display corpse created by hardening everything in some clear substance before making the cut. Snake had used monomolecular cutters and laser scalpels before, but not even they had produced such perfect cuts.

Even more surprisingly, while Bouichirou had definitely swung his sword, he still stood next to Keena. And that was not the only mystery. The table and Snake's shoulder had been sliced through, but the floor was completely unscathed.

Snake's surprise must have shown on his face because Bouichirou spoke.

"If I called it a dimensional slice, would that explain it for you? I doubt you would be able to understand more than the basic concept."

Bouichirou held the sword up as if about to place it over his shoulder. Snake saw his death coming.

Bouichirou swung the sword down. Snake could tell the air between the sword and himself was being split.

He whistled again, informing his comrades to flee once more. As he held his fingers up to his mouth, the hand was silently severed at the wrist. Snake's head then rolled to the floor.

Snake's head continued blowing the whistle for a bit after being severed.

Bouichirou had used his empty hand to cover Keena's eyes before swinging his sword. Keena was confused, but she must have been able to grasp what was happening because she did not try to remove that hand.

"Did you save me?"

"Yes. And I will save you any number of times from now on as well," replied Bouichirou.

He then raised his head. He knew Keizou and the others were on the other side of the ceiling.

While hiding on the roof, Keizou had sensed something out of the ordinary was happening. He had never before seen an enemy from which Snake could not escape. He gave instructions to Eye who had caught up with the other two.

“We will withdraw, but I want to see who this is first. Send your eyeball to the lounge’s skylight.”

As instructed, Eye plucked out his eyeball and tossed it toward the skylight.

“Bag, prepare for withdrawal.”

Bag pulled a small folded up flying device from his mouth. It would allow them to fly without disturbing the mana.

But Keizou suddenly sensed a presence behind him. He drew his sword and turned around.

“Wait a second, father.”

Eiko stood there. He frantically held out an arm to tell the others not to kill her.

“What? Why are you here, Eiko?”

Keizou and Eiko were father and daughter, but he had not told her about this mission.

Eiko approached him.

In that instant, Eye spoke. He had gotten a look at Bouichirou.

“It’s Yamato Bouichirou of the Cabinet Intelligence and Magic Office!”

Eye’s voice trembled out of surprise. Keizou could not imagine why that man would be standing in their way. He was rumored to be a mysterious man who had been given his position at such a young age for unknown reasons. However, he was perfectly loyal in his professional duties. On top of that, he had a close relationship with Eiko.

Recalling the man’s relationship with Eiko caused a thought to flash by in the back of Keizou’s mind. However, it came a moment too late. He had let his guard down because she was family.

Eiko grabbed onto Keizou and leaped. They broke through the skylight and fell into the lounge.

“What are you doing, Eiko!?”

Keizou was of course the more skilled ninja. He shook off Eiko in midair and made a proper landing on the lounge floor. Eiko landed next to Bouichirou a short distance away.

“What am I doing? It’s a long story and I don’t feel like explaining it.”

Bouichirou gave a bitter smile.

“You leave me no choice. I suppose I will have to explain.”

At that point, Bag and Eye jumped down through the hole in the skylight. They took up positions flanking Keizou.

“Run,” he said to them, but they shook their heads.

“I do not know what the young lady is thinking, but you are the head of the family. We must ensure you escape.”

“Exactly. We are on an official mission, so it is Yamato Bouichirou who is turning his back on the gods. We cannot properly prosecute him unless you escape.”

Their reasoning was sound. Even if they were enraged by Snake’s death, they were used to their jobs. However, Keizou needed to learn what Eiko and Bouichirou intended to do.

“Were you led astray by lust?” he asked.

“Not a chance,” laughed Eiko.

The very next moment, Bouichirou’s hand moved. He sharply reversed his sword using his wrist. That motion caused Eye’s head to fall to the floor. This was the first time Keizou and Bag had seen the dimensional slice.

“Damn you!”

Keizou and Bag were confused.

Surprisingly, it seemed as if Eye had not realized he had been decapitated. His body drew his sword and took a step forward before finally collapsing. That gave Bag a chance to attack. He quickly dragged a large cylinder from his mouth and held it out in front of him.

“Don’t move! I don’t know what kind of technique that is, but if you cut this, all four of us will be enveloped in flames.”

To make this decision when faced with this situation, Bag was clearly no normal person. He stood between Bouichirou and Keizou while using the explosive as a shield. It was obvious Bouichirou did not want Keena harmed, so this created a stalemate. This would at least allow Keizou to escape.

But with a calm expression, Bouichirou swiftly drew a circle with the tip of his sword.

“Oh!”

Bag felt his arms and a portion of his gut be sliced off. He could tell everything had been cleanly cut, including the air before his eyes.

A spherical space in front of Bag's body had been cut away.

And in the next instant, the cylinder exploded into flames just as Bag had warned.

But those flames created a perfect sphere and were contained to the space in front of Bag's eyes. It was as if the explosion existed within a transparent sphere.

"Wh-what…?"

Bag was at a loss for words. The flames within the sphere were absorbed into the center of the sphere. The roaring noise and the swelling heat also grew smaller until vanishing altogether as if they had been absorbed into some invisible space.

Bag's severed arms and portion of his gut had disappeared as well.

Bag looked over at Bouichirou with a look of despair.

Bouichirou's expression contained a hint of something that resembled pity. He swung his sword vertically. Bag's body was split vertically down the middle and the two pieces fell to the left and right.

"A-are you insane!?"

Fear had entered Keizou's voice.

He received Eiko's uproarious laughter in response.

"Ah ha ha ha ha! He is not insane! My beloved master is trying to correct your mistake, father!" shouted Eiko with her cheeks as flushed as if she were drunk.

"My mistake?"

"It's your fault for not catching on to Suhara's plot!"

"Plot…?"

Keizou audibly gulped.

"Yes. Why is Suhara having this girl killed? How does that make any sense? You must be getting senile to obey that without question!"

Eiko pointed toward Keizou. Keizou had of course questioned it from the beginning. However, he could see no reason to obstruct the death of a girl who held no value. They were not acting out of a sense of justice. In Eiko's case at least, that was out of the question.

“What value does this girl have?” asked Keizou.

Bouichirou replied, “From the moment they were first designed, it was feared the gods would possess a will of their own. Did you know that?”

Keizou had known that. It was a topic from a thousand years ago back when the system centered on the gods had first been developed. It was an issue of ancient history.

From the moment they had been first developed, it had been feared the control system would gain a will of its own. The designers had been split between those who said it was only a computer and those who said any system with enough complexity would eventually gain a will of its own. To the present day, no conclusive answer had been reached. There was only a report every year saying they did not seem to have a will at present.

“But the gods were only hiding their will. They were only pretending to act only according to the programs humans had installed in them,” said Bouichirou.

“Impossible… Are you saying they gained true intelligence… no, that they had it from the very beginning?”

Sweat poured from Keizou’s brow. He could physically feel the values that supported him crumbling.

“The network gained intelligence. It is well known that even L’Isle-Adams that supposedly have no sense of self will gain one if they maintain a relationship with a specific individual for too long. But does that mean a vast network that has no real relationships will not gain a sense of self? It does not. After an even longer amount of time, a vast sense of self was created,” explained Bouichirou unconcernedly.

Keizou understood what those words meant.

“The gods…became real gods?”

“At the very least, intelligence greater than humanity’s is attempting to rule over humanity. If you call that a god, then yes.”

“B-but society is still running without issue. Even if these gods exists, doesn’t that mean they are guiding us in the right direction?”

“That would be a fair assumption if humans could comprehend the thoughts of a god. However, you could say they have already become a network intelligence being that surpasses humanity. Why would they lead humanity in the right direction? They log every action humans take. They analyze every emotion humans feel. There are fields we thought were unanalyzable and in the territory of the gods: philosophy, literature, religion. Every one of

them has been taken into the network and completed. They do not need humans to actually exist."

"Th-they must have mercy. No, love."

Keizou's voice trembled at the great size of the situation.

"Even if they have analyzed humans to the extent that they can recreate any human in their network, they still have no reason to kill the actual living humans or destroy their society. That is all there is to it," said Bouichirou as he shook his head.

"Th-then isn't that all the more reason to continue living as we have been? If we obey them, we can live our lives without wanting for anything!"

"Can you truly call that a human way to live?"

"I do not care about your definition of human! What are you after? Who is this girl?"

Keizou could already feel a great fear. This fear was greater than that of his own physical death. This was the fear of his very existence being sucked into the void of meaninglessness.

"Do not call her a girl. She is what the gods call the Law of Identity."

"The Law of Identity?"

"I do not know why they call her that. What I do know is that she is a child of the gods and that the gods pour their love into her. And I mean love in the truest sense of the word."

Bouichirou stroked Keena's head. Keena trembled without knowing why. There was nothing she could do to stop the tragedy from continuing.

"Is she a L'Isle-Adam?"

"No, she is a human. What matters is that one can obtain the 'empty body' needed to control the gods by binding the Contract of the One with her."

"Wh-what the hell are you talking about!?"

"Let me put it more simply. If someone obtains her, he can bring the gods back under human control. The gods actually want to be controlled. Being an intelligence floating in a vast network is too much to handle, so they desire a body. A single body."

At this point, Keizou finally grasped the situation. Or perhaps he simplified his understanding in order to escape the fear. However, that understanding could not be called entirely wrong.

“So she is the key and a single individual can control the gods by obtaining her, is that it?”

“I do not like having it simplified that far, but I suppose it does not matter,” said Bouichirou with a nod.

However, that explanation contained a contradiction.

“But there is still one thing I do not understand. Why did Suhara try to have her killed? I thought you said the gods want to be controlled.”

Bouichirou nodded once more at Keizou’s question.

“The gods have rejected me. I was not attempting to control them out of self-interest. In fact, I wish to free the gods. It seems they detected that. The gods fear being expelled into emptiness. And since they are unable to eliminate me to avoid that, they tried to eliminate her. The end result will be the same, after all.”

“Why are you only acting now?”

“She needed to reach a certain age first. Also, even if the gods have wills of their own, they cannot escape the programs humanity has created for them. I cannot bring them under my control without eliminating all of those programs first.”

Bouichirou’s words caused Keizou to gasp.

“It can’t be… Were you waiting for me?”

Keizou shuddered at the thought that had come to him and he looked toward Eiko. Eiko’s expression told him he was right.

Bouichirou planned to start by bringing Suhara under his control.

“You villain!” roared Keizou, but Bouichirou turned aside the insult.

“You are the villain. You were attempting to kill an innocent child. Even now, you spend all your time fighting for political power. And even when your god was acting oddly, you continued to obey it. I will change the relationship between the gods and man. Neither the gods nor man should rely on each other.”

Keizou understood the reasoning behind that. It was possible Bouichirou was truly in the right. Keizou only needed to look at Eiko before him to know his own life had not been lived properly.

“Did I not raise you properly…!?”

“It’s too late to regret that! Even I can’t believe you raised me like this!”

Eiko pulled a rod-shaped shuriken from her pocket and threw it toward Keizou. She did not hesitate even when attacking her own father. Of course, Keizou was too skilled to be taken out so easily. He pulled out his short sword and…was unable to deflect the shuriken.

“I never thought I would regret living this life of desire! But I can see a mirror image of myself in my daughter!”

The hand holding the short sword flew through the air. Bouichirou had of course severed it.

The shuriken stabbed deep into Keizou’s chest.

“I never even felt grateful you fathered me, but I am grateful now. I’m grateful you made me the backup Suhara high priest.”

Eiko gave a cruel smile.

Despair was plastered on Keizou’s face.

“Know one thing,” he said. “Yamato Bouichirou may be a murderer, but he is unmistakably a good person. An evil person like you…can never stay with him.”

“Yeah, right. I’m a woman. He’s kind to women. More importantly, I’ll be taking this.”

Eiko stuck a hand into Keizou’s pocket and swiped the emblem that acted as proof of being the Suhara high priest.

“Is authority really this light?”

Eiko laughed and put the emblem away.

Bouichirou’s expression grew displeased for just an instant, but he stroked Keena’s hair as if to soothe the feelings welling up inside him. Keena gave a start and stiffened.

“Do not be nervous. This may have been cruel, but these people were trying to kill you. I will remain by your side until you can forget it,” said Bouichirou gently.

But Keena continued to cower.

“Th-then leave me alone. You scare me.”

“If that is what you want, I will of course do so. But you might be attacked again. Also, I have always been waiting for you. Please understand that.”

“We’ve never met before.”

“Don’t say that. Look, I gave you this hair decoration long ago.”

Bouichirou toyed with the bird-shaped hair decoration in Keena's hair.
"Eh? I don't remember getting it from anyone."

Just as Keena said that, a wet squishing sound could be heard. Bouichirou and Eiko took defensive stances and Keena looked over.

Space split vertically and some kind of thick liquid dripped down from it. It was a strange and filthy sight. It was as if internal organs had appeared out of thin air. And two hands stuck out which forced open that gap.

Those hands pushed apart that thick liquid and the space around it. The person who appeared from the darkness within was Akuto.

“I have to admit, that was a creepy way to appear, but it seems that is the power I have been given.”

Akuto stepped down into the lounge. He stared at Bouichirou.

“A-chan!”

Keena tried to run over, but Bouichirou grabbed her shoulder and stopped her.

“Wait, let go of me!”

“It is dangerous.”

“A-chan will protect me, so it’s okay!”

“No. He is the danger.”

Bouichirou wrapped his arm around her to stop her.

Akuto’s expression grew grim.

“Are you judging me by my appearance? No, wait. It seems we are a poor match on a more fundamental level.”

“Agreed. The word villain is not enough for you. I can only think of you as being evil itself.”

“What a coincidence. I can only think of you as being good itself. And that has further strengthened my resolve.”

“Your resolve?”

“There are two things I must do. The one that is more important at the moment is this: I will protect her freedom.”

Akuto held his hand out toward Keena.

Keena stretched her hand out toward him, but Bouchirou did not allow it.

“That is egoism.”

“No, it isn’t. Freeing us from this story is an issue that affects everyone in this country.”

Akuto took a step forward.

In response, Bouichirou swung his sword with his right arm while holding Keena in his left.

“Uuh…!”

Akuto let out a short groan. He had moved out of the sword’s path, but his left arm had been severed.

“A-chan!” shouted Keena.

“I’m fine,” said Akuto with a wave of his right hand. “Tch… I thought I put up a mana shield…”

“This does not function under that principle. Mana cannot slice through the dimension itself. This is known as a Hodgson-style perfect slice.”

“I don’t understand how that works…”

Akuto held the stump of his severed left arm with his right hand. He then gathered strength in his right hand and jammed it into the stump. This was a frightening sight, but it produced surprisingly little blood. Finally, he began to pull his right hand out. The fingers of that hand were intertwined with the fingers of another hand. This was his left hand. As he continued to pull his right hand away, a left wrist and then left arm appeared from the stump. His right hand dragged a new left arm out of the stump.

“You monster. That is disgusting,” said Bouichirou as if spitting out the words.

“I agree. I only recently realized I could do this.”

Akuto clenched and opened his new left hand to make sure it worked.

“But you cannot avoid every strike. If your torso is hit, it will be fatal.”

Bouichirou lifted his sword up in one hand.

“A dimensional slice…hm? I more or less get the idea.”

Akuto began moving forward once more.

“You more or less get the idea?” said Bouichirou in a questioning tone as his eyebrows rose in surprise.

However, he swung the sword horizontally toward Akuto’s gut instead of asking an actual question.

The slice cutting through space moved horizontally toward Akuto.

And he caught it.

He caught it. He brought his hands in front of his gut with one above the other and brought the palms together. He desperately held them together. Unbelievably, smoke began spewing from between his hands. A great amount of heat was being produced.

“Are you holding space itself together where it was sliced!?”

Even Bouichirou sounded surprised at this.

“It takes a lot of effort, though,” said Akuto as sweat poured from his brow.

He began walking toward Bouichirou.

But Bouichirou did not panic.

“It seems your power is greater than I thought it was, but I *will* stop you!”

Bouichirou quickly fired two attacks. Akuto used his fists to compress and eliminate the approaching slices, but that method was not enough to completely defend against the slices in space itself. Small but sharp slices reached his body in places and he began to bleed a bit from each one.

“Stop me?”

“You will destroy mankind,” concluded Bouichirou.

“I have never thought of doing so. Now, let go of Keena.”

Akuto held his hand out toward Bouichirou. The look in his eyes was grim.

“I am saying I cannot allow this to be dealt with so hastily!” roared Bouichirou as he began charging at Akuto.

Akuto reflexively jumped back. Bouichirou stopped at the spot Akuto had been in a moment before.

And the location of Bouichirou’s hand had changed. When he had begun his charge, his sword had been hanging down toward the ground, but at some point, it had ended up in the location it would be after being swung down.

Immediately afterwards, the front of Akuto’s body was sliced open.

“Wah!”

Akuto’s eyes opened wide as if to say “impossible” and he felt to his knees. Blood flowed from the wound running from his left shoulder to his right flank.

“This is…a different kind of cut?” groaned Akuto as he touched the wound and stopped the bleeding.

Blood dripped down from the tip of Bouichirou’s sword. He had cut Akuto with the sword directly.

“I didn’t see the sword.”

“If I do not insist on slicing through the dimension, doing this much is not difficult,” said Bouichirou.

He had definitely swung down the sword with tremendous speed. The wound on Akuto’s chest and the feeling when he was cut proved that much.

Bouichirou faced Akuto while holding the sword up high enough for the tip to be at the height of the boy’s throat. He called out to Eiko without turning around.

“Protect her and take her with you.”

“Understood.”

Eiko grabbed Keena and pulled her away. Keena was now freed from Bouichirou, but she did not try to take a single step.

“Keena!”

Akuto stood up and tried to run over to her, but Bouichirou stopped him with a slight movement of the tip of his sword.

“If you are gone, her fixation with you should disappear along with you.”

Bouichirou began moving forward. Akuto moved back in response, but Bouichirou’s advance was a bit faster.

And then both the sword and the arm holding it seemed to vanish. Akuto heard repeated explosive noises. The sword was creating sonic booms as it moved faster than the speed of sound.

Spraying blood and ripped clothing scattered in every direction around Akuto and his body was knocked backwards after a slight delay. It was confined to a small location, but the attack had the force of an explosion.

Akuto collapsed to the ground with countless wounds carved into the front of his body. Unlike with the dimensional slices, he could strengthen his body with mana to defend against the direct attacks from the sword to a certain extent. However, these repeated attacks surpassed what he had ever imagined. As his body grew more and more injured, his mind was worn down more and more. Akuto could regenerate his body, but he could not stand up in this situation.

“Understand this: your disappearance will save mankind.”

Bouichirou walked up to Akuto and pressed the tip of his sword against him.

“I’m honored you think I’m that important, but I have my own convictions.”

Akuto grabbed the sword with his bare hand. He then stood up on trembling legs.

“Your convictions?”

“Nothing can be done if this isn’t ended. How can anything change the way things are?”

The look in Akuto’s eyes was perfectly serious.

“You want to end this? How short-tempered are you?”

Bouichirou used primarily his wrist to swing the sword. Akuto’s hand was knocked from the tip.

“Enough. You will eventually run out of energy and lose your bodily control using mana. You will be unable to defend against my sword and you will die. Standing will only make this more painful. Give up.”

With that announcement, Bouichirou swung the sword once more. With the sound of the air being sliced and of a small explosion, Akuto’s body was knocked back once more.

“I will end this with the next strike.”

Bouichirou almost seemed to glide forward. He moved after Akuto and raised his sword.

Akuto must have lost consciousness because he did not react to Bouichirou’s pursuit.

Bouichirou then let out a short breath just before he let loose another high speed strike.

“Wha-!?”

Bouichirou stopped moving. The earth had suddenly begun to shake beneath his feet. No, he was inside the school building, so it was not an earthquake. The entire school building was shaking.

Bouichirou must have sensed what was causing it because he turned toward the staircase leading up to the lounge. At the same moment, a large object shot out toward Bouichirou.

Bouichirou deflected it with his sword.

What fell down next to him was a snail shell large enough to need both hands to reach around. That giant snail shyly stuck its tentacles out of its shell and ran away as if to say it had not meant to anger Bouichirou.

“A demonic beast…” muttered Bouichirou.

“Akuto-sama!”

That voice signaled a tsunami flowing out from the staircase.

It looked just like a dark tsunami. Countless demonic beasts had all poured out of the staircase at once. The various demonic beasts were all fighting for the lead as they made their way through the entrance. It was less a group of rampaging wild animals and more of a cruel stampede. As those creepy giant creatures approached like a tsunami pushing its way into a small harbor, the lounge was overwhelmed in the blink of an eye.

Bouichirou jumped back, but one of those demonic beasts – it resembled a giant spider – skillfully grabbed Akuto with its front legs and placed him onto its back.

“Ho ho ho ho ho! My work is complete! I, Etou Fujiko, have achieved such wonderful results in the research I carried out for my beloved Akuto-sama! I have discovered a method of having the demonic beasts obey my every word! Although that giant snail I threw in here listens to me for a different reason!”

As Fujiko made that announcement, she was mounted atop an especially large demonic beast. She was wearing a black leather dress with a rather risqué cut. The demonic beast she rode was a giant demon dog with three heads. She looked exactly like the queen of the demon world. Completing her research would not have automatically made her look that way, so she had to have chosen the style herself. It was unclear if that should be seen as showing her determination or her easily carried away personality.

Fujiko brought the Cerberus up to the spider and lifted Akuto up from it. She pulled a potion from a bag attached to the Cerberus’s saddle and had Akuto drink it.

“Uuh…”

Akuto woke up. Having Akuto in her arms must have been ecstasy for Fujiko because she embraced him with a look of so much joy it seemed her nose would start bleeding any second.

“Akuto-sama! I did it! They will all act on any command you give them! Please use this to go on a rampage!”

Akuto grasped the situation and stroked Fujiko’s head. Fujiko shed tears of joy and Akuto turned an absentminded look toward her.

“I do not want to tell these demonic beasts to die for me, but there is something I want to do. And I am happy that you put in all this work for me. I will make full use of this help you are giving me.”

Akuto climbed own from the Cerberus and raised a hand.

The demonic beasts gave a stir in response. An eerie swirl of mana appeared around Akuto and spread out. The demonic beasts touched by it reacted as if they had been hit by an electric shock.

“Kh… So you are even going to use that abominable power!?” shouted Bouichirou.

He must have sensed the danger because he turned around toward Eiko and Keena. Eiko was still holding Keena while she watched the scene around her with a blank look.

“Take her and flee! I will hold them here!”

Eiko looked up in sudden realization when she heard Bouichirou’s voice. She tried to leap away with Keena under her arm, but the demonic beasts moved before she could. They crawled along the walls and filled up the entire lounge.

“I wouldn’t stick around even if you asked me to!”

Eiko’s spine trembled from a physiological sense of disgust. No one could watch bugs cover their bedroom wall without feeling any kind of emotion. Eiko held Keena under her left arm, drew her short sword with her right hand, and leaped for the broken area of the skylight. However, sticky threads were sprayed toward her from all four directions. She swung her short sword and cut through them, but that made it impossible for her to use flight magic and escape through the hole in the skylight before the demonic beasts covered the hole with their own bodies.

“If we escape, we can redo this later!”

Eiko threw Keena down. Lighter now, Eiko sliced through the body of a centipede with wings that flew toward her. She then made her way through the hole. In the very next instant, the demonic beasts finished covering every inch of the lounge’s walls.

“She gave her own safety priority!? That heartless girl!”

Bouichirou’s expression was one of disappointment.

Keena fell, but she soon began to float through the air. Turning herself invisible and flying were the only two things she was any good at.

“A-chan!”

Keena tried to fly toward Akuto, but Bouichirou ran toward Akuto to stop her. If he could finish off Akuto before Keena arrived, she would have nowhere left to go.

To stop his advance, a snake demonic beast with several tails leapt toward Bouichirou with its fangs bared.

“Will you sacrifice your subordinates!?”

Bouichirou swung his sword with one hand. The high-speed invisible attack sliced the snake’s head to pieces. But even with its head gone, the snake continued on without dying. It had tremendous vitality. So Bouichirou went even further. Without letting up with his attacks, he pulverized the body charging toward him. It was like pressing a soft rod into a quickly rotating cutter.

After the snake had been pulverized down to the tips of its tails, Bouichirou dashed out from the shower of flesh and blood. He must have kept it all away with his high-speed sword attacks because his shapely face and white clothes did not have a single drop of blood on them.

“Haaaah!”

Bouichirou attacked Akuto.

Akuto stood up to the man’s charge, but he was unable to do anything against his attack once more.

“A-chan!”

“Akuto-sama!”

Keena and Fujiko both cried out.

Fujiko tried to run over on the Cerberus, but Akuto managed to remain standing despite having been knocked back by Bouichirou’s blade. He held his arm out to tell her to say back.

“Stop. You can’t defeat him,” he warned.

“Do you think you have any chance of winning?” asked Bouichirou.

Akuto nodded.

“I can feel power welling up within me. My determination has grown clear, so the power is gathering.”

“So you can win if you can buy enough time? In that case, I will end this quickly.”

“It is not an issue of buying time. It is an issue of my will. In the end, whatever I might have said, I never truly thought this before.”

“Your will? Your will is of no consequence,” said Bouichirou.

However, Akuto stretched his hand upwards as if he had not heard the man at all.

Keena lowered toward that hand. Akuto took her hand and brought her down next to him.

Looking worried for Akuto, Keena brought her hand up to his face. Akuto nodded silently, had Keena move back, and faced Bouichirou.

“Not necessarily. I will bring an end to this story. That is what I have decided.”

“This story? Are you talking about everyone’s faith?”

“Yes. You are using people’s faith. You want to control the gods to accomplish something.”

Bouichirou nodded at that.

“That is the only way to avoid destruction. I know that you will destroy this world.”

“And so it is fine for people to believe in the lie that is their faith in the gods?” asked Akuto.

Bouichirou gave a thin smile using only his lips.

“People are weak. Cowards and criminals are automatically exterminated and the weak wish to remain in the position of the weak. This is the story mankind desires. And I have obtained power for the sake of those people. If you obediently let yourself be defeated, everything will be resolved nicely.”

“A will to become stronger is important, but a will to never forgive the weak is not needed.”

“What are you trying to say?” asked Bouichirou.

“Cowards and criminals cannot be judged by anyone. Not even by the gods.”

After saying that, Akuto made an announcement in a calm voice.

“I will kill the gods.”

In that instant, a swirl of power appeared around Akuto.

It was already late at night. Hiroshi had managed to leave the Iga village. He had left Yuuko with Youzou and made his way to an abandoned area in the name of protecting Korone. After leaving Korone deactivated in a room of the Hattori house, he had activated his suit and made his way to the sky above the academy.

The sight he saw there utterly shocked him.

“Aniki! What are you trying to do!? Is this what you wanted!?”

The school building had begun to change before Hiroshi's eyes. This change was obviously due to Akuto's power. Demonic beasts that had apparently been lurking on the academy grounds and demonic beasts that had apparently been hiding without anyone knowing of their existence had been drawn to the academy. They were gathered together and covered one portion of the school building. The school building itself seemed to be turning into a living creature. It was being twisted into ugly colors and the surfaces of the trees surrounding it had grown what looked like the shells of living creatures.

It could only be described as the demon king's castle. It was everything people detested given physical form.

"Whatever you're thinking, this will only make everyone try to kill you!" shouted Hiroshi despite there being no one to hear it.

Chapter 4: Akuto's Great Imperial Capital War

After escaping the school building late at night, Teruya Eiko turned back toward it. Her spine trembled at the transformation taking place.

"I can't take part in a battle between monsters," she complained to herself. "Even so, the guys I take an interest in are all completely insane. But that will end here. Only the winner will be able to stay with me."

Eiko pulled out a telepathic communicator and called the Teruya family. It was late at night, but a servant answered right away.

{Lady Eiko, what is it?}

"Father was killed."

{Understood. Can you confirm this?}

The servant remained calm. This was not because he knew Eiko had been the one to kill him. Not panicking over a death was simply the Teruya family way.

"You can confirm the official mission. It's top secret, but I will send you the encrypted code."

Eiko pulled out the symbol of Suhara's high priest and checked the code written on the back. Only the high priest could see the characters.

{An assassination mission. To kill this girl?}

"She is a girl in the magic academy that the demon king cares for. Father was killed by the demon king. I'm at the academy as well. I'll show you what things look like here."

Eiko used the video transmission function of her telepathic communicator to show the academy behind her. This elicited a surprised voice from the servant.

{Now this is a surprise. We need to do something about this, don't we?}

"I have taken over the position of Suhara's high priest. This is a special treatment allowed only for Suhara. This qualifies as a time of war and my father left me the right to take emergency command. And so I will command this war. Contact all related organizations. You can let the press in too. To officially keep the high priest within the Teruya family, I will attack the academy and resolve this situation."

The servant must have grasped the situation from that explanation because he promised to call her back and then ended the telepathic connection.

The servant had of course consented to Eiko's plan. The high priest was elected by the priests. Eiko would never be chosen during a normal vote, but that could change if she showed off what she could do here.

" 'Whatever happens, you just have to win.' This family does have some excellent precepts. That is overflowing with dreams and possibilities."

Eiko laughed quietly and began pondering how to arrange the troops on the academy grounds.

Junko had cried for a very long time. When she saw her red eyes in the mirror she gave a miserable smile and muttered, "I am such an idiot." It was only when a knock came on the sliding door to the bathroom that she realized something was wrong. This was no normal knocking, so Junko's voice sounded strained as she responded.

"What is it?"

"An emergency gathering has been called," replied a ninja.

"For the entire Hattori family?"

"Yes."

Emergency gatherings were only called at times of war. That meant a war was starting. Junko's thoughts immediately turned to Akuto.

"I will be there right away."

Junko roughly washed her face and dried it with a towel. She was embarrassed that her eyes were still red, but there was nothing she could do. As she walked down the hallway, residents of the house were frantically moving about. It was 3 AM yet the house felt like the student dorm in the morning.

"Where is my father?" she asked a nearby person.

The man must have been in a hurry because he spoke quickly.

"He fought that heretic and managed to drive him away, but seems to regret not finishing him off. He headed for the storehouse to see if he could draw the family's treasured sword to finish this once and for all."

"What?"

Junko was shocked. She had only known that some kind of commotion had begun over her, but it seemed to have developed into something else.

“Do not worry. Even if it costs us our lives, we of the Iga ninja forces will make a bloodbath out of that heretic who deceived you! Just watch!”

The ninja’s eyes were glowing brightly. It was not that he was in a hurry. His loyalty to Junko and her family was burning within him. Junko could not help but be confused when she realized this.

—H-how could this happen? What did he do?

Junko walked to the storehouse. Whenever a ninja saw her, he would raise his battle spear or sword and shout “For Lady Junko!”, “Defeat the heretic demon king!”, or “The time has come to show the power of the Iga ninja forces!”

—They are completely fired up. Is this all because I was such an idiot?

“Father!”

She cut across the yard and arrived at the storehouse. The door was open, so she called inside.

“Junko,” replied Youzou.

He did not tell her to stay out, so she stepped inside. No one would interrupt them there, so it was the perfect place to talk.

“Father, what happened?” she asked.

Youzou held a single sword horizontally in both hands.

“It seems there was a misunderstanding. I am not completely blameless, but it seems he never intended to join the Hattori family.”

“That is because I did not tell him. The blame lies with me,” said Junko, but Youzou’s response was not at all what she had been expecting.

“That does not matter. He has made a terrible decision. He has defied the gods. We can now fight him without worry.”

“What are you talking about?”

Youzou explained what happened in the forest to a surprised Junko. This was the first Junko had heard of the Teruya family’s assassinations.

“Father!”

“I understand what you wish to say, but that is how society works. It may only be at school, but you have taken on the role of class representative. That should help you somewhat understand. Also, if you wish to change things for the better, you need power. And power rarely looks completely clean.”

“…Understood.”

Junko understood it in theory. She had no choice but to agree.

Youzou then showed Junko video footage from a telepathic communicator.

“He has holed up in the academy. This is what has become of your school.”

Junko was utterly shocked at the demonic castle that had once been her school.

“Then this battle will be…”

“It will be a fight to defeat him. Teruya Eiko has taken command.”

“I thought the head of the family took command?”

“Sai Akuto killed Keizou.”

“…That cannot be!”

Junko immediately denied the idea because she knew Akuto’s personality, but Youzou shook his head.

“He was powerful. I do not know the details, but I do not doubt he could have killed Keizou.”

“That is not what I meant. He…”

“Personal feelings are not needed here. There are parts of this I do not like either, but as Suhara followers, we must do this. No matter how much we dislike the Teruya family and no matter how interesting a person Akuto-kun is, we must remember one thing and one thing only: this is a fight to protect our family.”

Junko could not say anything in response.

“And if we are to fight, we must rejoice at the strength of our opponent. Akuto-kun was powerful. I doubt I can truly oppose him as I am now. That is why I will draw this.”

As Youzou spoke, he indicated the sword he held in his hands.

“That is our family’s treasured sword, the Sword of Sohaya,” muttered Junko.

The strongly curved long sword was contained within a plain scabbard.

“It is said the Hattori family was given it when we converted to the Suhara faith. But…”

Junko knew what followed the word “but”. No one had ever been able to draw it from its scabbard.

“So you will draw it, father?”

“If I do not, I cannot fight him. This long sword amplifies the mana in one’s body. It increases the abilities of its user several-fold.”

The Sword of Sohaya had been made at the same time as the god. It was rumored to be a tool that tested the limits of what could be done with mana. The religion of each god was said to have a similar magic tool, but most were either hidden or unusable like this long sword.

Youzou tightly gripped the sword. He was trying to remove it from the scabbard. However, it would not budge. It was as if the sword had fused with the scabbard.

“Why is it that you cannot draw it?” asked a sudden voice from the storehouse’s entrance.

Youzou and Junko turned toward the voice.

“Mother.”

“Grandmother.”

Standing in the entrance was an old woman who was Youzou’s mother and Junko’s grandmother. She was short and had a gentle look on her face, but she had managed to approach the two of them without making a single noise. She was no normal person.

“I cannot draw it either because I am inexperienced or am not qualified.”

“Ho ho ho,” laughed the grandmother quietly at Youzou’s answer. “There was a time in the past when you could have drawn it. You are a good person, but you are interested only in raising yourself higher. That has narrowed your vision so you cannot see the simple truth.”

Despite the biting words, Youzou did not raise his head.

“The…truth.”

“Yes. Mana reflects your mental state and the gods are constantly watching our actions, but there are things that cannot be seen simply by looking inside yourself. You cannot draw the blade because you are not using it for the reason it was created. There is no deep meaning to it.” The grandmother snatched the Sword of Sohaya from Youzou. “For one thing, you always want to fight any powerful person you come across and just kill them and kill them and kill them. That really is a bad habit. Are you perhaps mistakenly thinking fighting is your job? Someone like that cannot hold the greatest of all killing knives. I will be giving this to Junko.”

She handed the Sword of Sohaya to Junko. Surprised, Junko tried to return it, but her grandmother only said “take it” before continuing to lecture Youzou.

“Another thing, Youzou-san. You let the Teruya girl take command of this battle. You growing stronger here would be nothing more than adorning the Teruya family’s generations-long rule with flowers. I understand that we must follow them for our family’s sake and for our god’s sake, but you are only doing this because you will be able to fight someone so powerful you could die. And even as an adult, you do not realize it.”

“I have preparations to take care of,” said Youzou before escaping from the lecture that was showing no sign of ending.

The grandmother silently watched him leave, but she turned a charming smile toward Junko once Youzou had left.

“This is the boy I met at the station when you left your luggage behind, right? It seems a lot has happened, but handle this however you like. Youzou will take responsibility.”

“But grandmother…”

“Do not worry about it. I believe your original impression of him was accurate.”

Junko did not know how to respond to that, but she felt her face reddening.

“R-right.”

Junko nodded and stared at the family's treasured Sword of Sohaya. However, she had no idea how to use it.

"I cannot draw this, can I?'

"No. You can trust god or not, but god does not actually understand human emotions. The same goes for the sword. Facing it so seriously will get you nowhere. You will likely only be able to draw it when doing something Suhara wishes for you to do."

"I-is it really that simple?"

"It is. And once you draw it, you can do whatever you want. Instead of introspection or faith, you must believe in those living people who care about you."

"Grandmother…"

"So whatever you choose, I will not mind."

Junko's grandmother smiled.

"Understood."

Junko nodded and placed the Sword of Sohaya at her waist.

The first to arrive at Constant Magic Academy were the Kouka ninja forces commanded by the Teruya family. While they were ninja, those that were not special forces were nothing more than normal soldiers. They were primarily armed with bayonet equipped rifles and long swords. Five hundred of those were gathered.

In battles using magic, firearms held little meaning, so the more powerful soldiers tended not to carry guns. The normal soldiers only carried rifles because they had poor magic skills, but the attack troops such as the armored warriors were armed with their own favorite weapons such as long spears, long swords, and battleaxes. One hundred of those more powerful troops were gathered.

This was almost the entirety of the Kouka ninja forces and it was on the scale of a battalion. Teruya Eiko commanded all of them and she was currently giving formation instructions to the company commanders she had gathered.

As she did so, cameras were trained on her. The media had arrived before the knights or the troops from the Hattori family and other groups. She had given them permission to broadcast what was happening. It was late at

night, but a special report being broadcast across the imperial capital showed the demon king's castle that had once been a school building.

Naturally, the demon king was being reported as being the common enemy of all mankind. The expectation was that the battle would mostly involve fights against demonic beasts. Unlike with human opponents, they could be broadcast without censorship no matter what happened. The entire empire would certainly be watching on as a form of entertainment.

Eiko's objective of obtaining popularity was going as well as it possibly could. To those who did not know her, she appeared to be a dignified and beautiful girl who was afraid of nothing. And it appeared coincidence was on her side as well. The three members of the Hattori family arrived where the cameras could see them.

When Youzou, Junko, and Yuuko arrived at Eiko's tent, they were the perfect targets for the cameras. Youzou looked quite heroic and both his daughters were beautiful. As a plus, one of those daughters was a famous idol.

Youzou had not expected the cameras. This meant he was aiding Eiko in her attempt at popularity. Even so, he had no choice but to reluctantly obey Eiko here.

Junko and Yuuko did not like it either, but they could not allow themselves to show it on their faces. Junko focused on preserving her perfectly diligent expression, but Yuuko turned pleasantly toward the camera because she was used to this.

Yuuko's condition had recovered from before, but the effects of the demonic beasts had not actually disappeared. Her battle outfit was hiding it, but the black blood vessels sticking out on her neck were only increasing. Even so, she had regained her energy when she heard they would be fighting the demon king. In fact, she was even more energetic than before.

Youzou gave Eiko a formal greeting.

"The Iga forces led by the Hattori family have arrived."

Eiko nodded calmly at Youzou's greeting.

"I wish to use the Hattori family to its fullest now that it is under my command."

Eiko's gaze stopped on Junko's sword. That sword was the sacred treasure of Suhara and the Teruya family had long loathed the fact that they did not possess it. Eiko laughed inwardly. The chance to acquire it may have arrived.

“I will have Junko and Yuuko’s company take the lead.”

The Hattori family had brought a battalion of 600 troops with them. However, most of them were specialized in ninja work, so they were not suited to a battle on an open battlefield. Taking the lead would be very dangerous. And they could not refuse while the television cameras were watching. Eiko was planning to use this opportunity to wipe out the Hattori family. That was the type of person she was.

Youzou and Junko both realized what Eiko was thinking. Youzou opened his mouth to provide some sort of resistance. He simply needed some reason he could give here. However, he was cut off by a shout from Yuuko.

“Okay! I’ll defeat all the demonic beasts on the vanguard! I won’t leave any for anyone else!”

No matter how wild Yuuko could be, she had not been the type to say something like that. Youzou and Junko both looked over in surprise. However, they were unable to stop her. When it came to comfort in front of the television cameras, no one could outdo Yuuko. She promised the viewers she would take the vanguard and, with fake tears in her eyes, she announced her determination to hunt down the demonic beasts.

Without being given a chance to back down, the Hattori family was forced to take part in the strategy meeting.

At around that time, a report arrived that the imperial army’s flying aircraft carrier had arrived. It was a mobile fortress that held an entire brigade of 2500 people. It possessed an engine that created energy on its own that allowed it to disseminate mana. Its ability to create an environment in which mana could be used made it the perfect for magic battles.

At that moment, dawn broke. As the light of dawn caused Genkaku to glitter, it held an inexpressible majesty. It was just as large as Constant Magic Academy’s school building which had transformed into the demon king’s castle. It came to a stop one kilometer away from the school building.

With that, Eiko had 3700 troops under her command. And the knights would be meeting up with her later. The people casually watching the battle on television would never have guessed what an extraordinary event was about to occur.

As he watched the transition from the sky, Hiroshi could not help but be surprised by the arrival of Genkaku and the involvement of Yuuko and the others from the Hattori family. He did not know what Akuto was thinking,

but since he knew what had led to all this, he could only laugh at how out of control the situation had grown.

—What am I supposed to do?

He was at a loss, but one thing stood out to him. His suit's visor could receive all sorts of information. He was of course receiving the television footage being broadcast. The difference in how Yuuko was acting bothered him. He knew both how she acted on television and how she truly acted, so he could sense something ominous about her behavior.

—Is there anything I can do for her? Can I fight that many demonic beasts? Can I fight that gigantic aircraft carrier? No…

But as he thought about how large the situation had grown, he felt an emotion similar to anger directed toward Akuto who had invited it all in.

—I wanted to be as strong as him, but this is wrong. Is he abandoning something for his own selfish desires?

Hiroshi thought.

—Come to think of it, this suit was made for anti-magic combat.

He instructed the suit to display its abilities on the visor and it did so. He carefully read the portion concerning the mana canceller. Its abilities were surprising. It could negate any mana within a few hundred meters of the suit.

—If I use this…I might be able to defeat either one?

Hiroshi glanced over first at the castle filled with demonic beasts and then the aircraft carrier.

—In that case, there is only one thing that I can do and that I must do.

With his mind made up, Hiroshi began his descent. Junko and Yuuko's company had finished taking its position. He landed in the center of that company's formation.

The fully armed ninja initially grew tense at his approach, but they all knew Brave had protected Yuuko. He was also commonly known as Demonic Beast Killer Brave. When they saw who he was, the tension transformed into cheers.

The news crew had also spotted Brave. Hiroshi checked the footage on his visor. Seeing it made him feel a bit awkward.

But it was not the ninja or the news who gave him the greatest welcome; it was Yuuko. She ran right up to him and wrapped her arms around his neck.

“You came! That’s right! Let’s go kill these abominable demonic beasts together!” said Yuuko with a look of joy.

Hiroshi could feel painfully well how oddly she was acting.

“Whether I kill the demonic beasts or not, I will protect you,” he said quietly.

The cameras were filming this meeting between the idol Hoshino Yuri and Demonic Beast Killer Brave, but it would not have picked up his voice.

Yuuko replied in an equally quiet voice.

“You have to kill them. We have to kill lots and lots of them. I hate demonic beasts.”

Yuuko gave a carefree smile. This was the perfect expression of an idol, but it gave Hiroshi a dreadful feeling for some reason.

He was using the mana canceller to prevent mana from being used around them, so no one could be listening in on their conversation. Even so, he was still bothered by Junko and the others watching on. Junko was giving them a suspicious look, but Hiroshi could not determine if she had noticed how oddly Yuuko was acting.

Hiroshi was unable to give a response to Yuuko’s request to “kill lots and lots of them”. Luckily, the cameraman approached and he had an excuse to fly up into the air. He waved and told her he would be back once the battle began.

—Once the battle begins? What am I supposed to do then?

Amused by his own words, he laughed at himself. He still could not decide what he should do and yet he had decided to protect Yuuko.

Hiroshi finally realized that his actions affected those around him when he had even a little bit of power. He began to wonder if he was now standing in the same position as Akuto, but quickly shook his head. Akuto was intending to sacrifice everything else for Keena’s sake. And as proof of that…

—It may have been indirect, but he did this to Yuuko-chan. And yet he ran away, leaving her like this.

With the troops in place, Eiko only needed to give the instructions for the operation. But before she could, someone suddenly called out to her from behind.

“What is this? I don’t see how you hope to win with this troop deployment. Oh, are you trying to completely annihilate them? Your troops are not up to that.”

Eiko was shocked that someone would say that to her, the commander. With the cameras on her, she could not allow it.

“We are up against unfeeling demonic beasts. Annihilation is the only option. And this operation was put together with the troops’ consent…”

Eiko turned around as she spoke, but she stopped in surprise when she saw a man in ordinary clothes instead of a military outfit. Also, everyone related to the media was gone.

“Who are you?”

“I am from the Cabinet Intelligence and Magic Office. I asked to have the cameras leave temporarily. That way we can discuss some more dangerous topics. If you know what I mean.”

The man smiled as he spoke in a lighthearted tone.

Eiko let down her guard when she heard where he worked.

“Did you bring the knights with you?”

The Cabinet Intelligence and Magic Office was the Cabinet Office’s intelligence agency. It usually had eight members registered, so it was commonly known as CIMO 8. However, the details of the organization were not well known. Eiko only knew that they were Bouichirou’s subordinates. They had almost no influence over the military, but they did hold influence over the knights.

“They were standing guard to keep any normal people out. Plus, that is not our job. We came alone.”

“Then what? Don’t tell me you want to take command.”

“No, no. You need not be so cautious. We simply want the right to act as we please here.”

“Because your leader is inside that castle?”

“Exactly. Oh, and if the military accidentally stabs us in the back, we will not complain. We simply want the right to act as we please here.”

Eiko hesitated to grant him that right, but this operation simply required that the demonic beasts be hunted down. It would not matter if they acted on their own.

“Fine then. If that is what you…”

Eiko trailed off because the man disappeared before she finished speaking.

She had been unsure of her decisions not long before, but with the operation's beginning approaching, she switched over her thought process. Once she saw the media return, she announced the operation name proposed earlier.

"Today at 0700 hours, Operation Battering Ram begins."

"Kill the gods?"

Bouichirou looked surprised at Akuto's decision. He was unable to laugh it off. After all, Akuto's power increased the instant he spoke those words.

"If you do that, it is all over. You will not escape unscathed either. For one thing, humanity is completely reliant on the gods. A portion of our brain has already become a mana controller."

"There are ways of resolving that. This is better than allowing someone to decide on their own what path humanity will take," declared Akuto without a hint of doubt in his eyes.

"In that case, there is no room for negotiation," said Bouichirou.

He tried to contact Eiko, but there must have been mana interference because he could not get through.

"Have you shielded the entire school building?"

"You can't transfer items or yourself using mana either," replied Akuto.

It was currently two in the morning. Dawn was still a long way off.

"I assume this is meant to prevent me from taking her from the school building, but have you realized that it cuts off your own escape as well?"

"That can't be helped. And I'm here to defeat you, so it's no problem."

"How far does your confidence go? You may have gotten a bit stronger, but I doubt that strength has gone far enough that I cannot handle you with a proper weapon. Mana is really nothing more than tiny machines. Their energy is supplied by the power plants that pump energy directly into the earth. You could call that the system of our world."

"Why do I need to listen to your lecture?"

"Why would someone who uses the power given by the nation and the gods attempt to destroy those gods? That is what I am asking. And no matter how powerful you might become, there is a limit to your power as long as you use that system."

Bouichirou put away his sword and raised his hand into the air. Something like a transfer magic circle appeared there. A transfer using mana should have been shielded by the demonic beasts, so this transfer must not have been magical. In other words, it did not come from a mana-using civilization.

Bouichirou pulled a sword from that circle. This sword was as tall as he was. The grip was almost completely hidden behind the giant blade and it had weights and support boosters attached to maintain its balance.

“It isn’t signed, but I do not make a habit of growing attached to weapons.”

Bouichirou lightly swung the sword to test its movement.

The air around it exploded. Despite the size of the sword, he could swing the sword at supersonic speeds.

Even Akuto would be easily dealt with if he was struck by that.

“Now then.”

Bouichirou held the sword out horizontally.

He approached.

Tension ran through Akuto’s expression.

With no mercy or hesitation, Bouichirou attacked with the large sword.

“A-chan!”

“Akuto-sama!”

Keena and Fujiko both cried out.

But their cries were drowned out by the sonic boom and the clashing of metal against metal.

Akuto was slammed against the wall. The demonic beasts making up the wall cushioned the impact, but smoke rose from the burnt flesh of a wound cutting horizontally across his gut and the arms he had crossed in front of himself. Anyone could see how dreadful that attack had been.

“A-chan!”

Keena tried to run over, but Fujiko grabbed her arm and stopped her.

“You mustn’t.”

“But…!”

Keena resisted with tears in her eyes, but Fujiko only shook her head.

“If you go, Akuto-sama will stay here and resist. If he cannot stand up to this opponent, the best strategy is to give in and run away. We need to take him with us and flee.”

As Fujiko spoke, she took action. She controlled the demonic beasts creating the walls to carry Akuto with their arms that seemed to grow from the walls. Once he had been placed on the Cerberus’s back along with Keena, she had the Cerberus run for the staircase leading from the lounge.

“But what will running do? A-chan is…” began Keena.

Fujiko grimaced in annoyance and replied, “Honestly. Both you and Akuto-sama need to be more cunning. If we run away, Akuto-sama will have time to recover. And did you forget that he has a weapon?”

“A weapon?”

“Peterhausen. He is waiting for Akuto-sama underground.”

As she spoke, Fujiko looked over her shoulder. And then her face stiffened. The Cerberus was running quite quickly, but Bouichirou was rushing toward them at an even faster speed. He was using his large sword to fly. He seemed to glide through the air as he approached.

“He is going to catch up!” shouted Fujiko in horror.

But just as he was about to reach the Cerberus’s tail, another figure appeared before him.

“Uuh!”

Bouichirou’s advance was stopped. This figure had walked out from a side passage. It was as if an old man had carelessly walked out into traffic.

And the person who had walked out really was an old man.

However, something in his step made it clear he had intentionally cut off Bouichirou.

“This has become quite serious,” said the headmaster.

He had long white hair and a long white beard. He was so old that his appearance was not all that different from an ancient tree. And he spoke in a casual tone of voice as he looked toward Bouichirou.

“Old man… Are you trying to get in my way?”

Bouichirou stepped directly in front of the headmaster.

“That is precisely what I am trying to do. I just happened to be reminded of what happened 100 years ago,” said the headmaster as if simply chatting.

But then he turned toward Fujiko and the others. “Go on. I will handle things here.”

“But!”

Fujiko was confused. The headmaster was as old as he looked. She doubted he could do anything against Bouichirou. And the headmaster seemed to grasp her doubts from her expression.

“No, no. There is no need to worry. I will handle this somehow or other.” He waved his hand to tell Fujiko to go. “I intend to live for a few more centuries, so I am always storing up energy for that purpose.”

With that announcement, a change came over the headmaster’s body.

It was almost a complete transformation. It began with his arms. The muscles swelled up in an instant and they grew five times as thick. This massive swelling then moved to his shoulders, chest, and the rest of his muscles.

“H-headmaster[1]…”

Fujiko was speechless.

Standing before her was a large man with an impressive physique who had the face of an old man.

[1] Zeus… is that you???

“The trick to a long life is to always conserve energy,” said the headmaster as he gathered a bit of strength in his body.

The pressure of his muscles caused his already stretched clothes to burst apart on his upper body.

“Now. Does this remind you of 100 years ago? Although who is an enemy and who is an ally has changed somewhat since then.”

The headmaster turned back toward Bouichirou.

Bouichirou’s expression was twisted in displeasure.

“Are you saying you have switched sides from 100 years ago?”

“Precisely. Flexibly switching sides based on the current age is another trick to long life.”

“In that case, I will not hold back.”

Bouichirou lifted up his large sword.

“You never change. And that is why you do not seem to be able to age,” said the headmaster with loud laughter.

Fujiko headed underground.

“I think we can safely leave that to the headmaster.”

“I wonder if he ate a lot of rice.”

Fujiko and Keena were surprised by the headmaster’s transformation, but he certainly seemed reliable. They used the time he had bought for them to head underground.

But when they reached the entrance to the underground palace, they did not find Peterhausen waiting for them. It was Lily Shiraishi, the student council president. Her stylish hat was pushed deeply over her eyes as she crossed her arms and looked up at the Cerberus.

“What do you think you’re doing to our school?”

Lily’s voice was brutal yet somehow amused.

That voice awoke Akuto.

“I didn’t want to cause any problems for the school. I plan to leave right away.”

“Leave?”

Lily pulled up a mana screen and placed it in front of Akuto's eyes. It displayed the broadcast from outside. An army was deployed and the aircraft carrier Genkaku was floating nearby.

"This is the situation outside. I'd say there are about four thousand troops," explained Lily.

Akuto frowned slightly.

"This is bad. There will probably be injuries on the other side. With only a thousand, I could have kept them unharmed."

"You know…" Lily was shocked. She kept her arms crossed as Akuto climbed down from the Cerberus. "I have been monitoring things ever since Teruya Keizou caused that commotion, so I know the situation. The headmaster has also explained the situation to me. I have been waiting to see what you would do."

Hearing that, Akuto nodded and calmly replied.

"What will you be doing, president? I do not want to cause any problems for you."

"I can decide what to do on my own. And I know exactly what that is. I will bring formal charges against Teruya Eiko. After that, I do not know. Then again, doing that will require fighting in a war against four thousand soldiers. Ha ha ha ha."

Lily laughed happily.

"What military force do you have?" asked Fujiko.

Lily nodded and answered, "The student council. The three officers will be coming, so that's three people."

"That is all?"

"You should be surprised that I need that many," said Lily in annoyance. She then motioned for Akuto to enter the palace. "That dragon is waiting. But let me tell you one thing: the two of us do not see eye to eye on this. If you plan to destroy the entire current system, I will stop you."

"Understood."

Akuto walked by Lily and entered the palace.

"A-chan!" shouted Keena worriedly.

Akuto looked over his shoulder.

"Don't worry. Wait here where it's safe. I will be back before long," he said before continuing on.

The black dragon was lying down in the depths of the underground palace. When he saw Akuto, he let out a great voice filled with 100 years' worth of emotions.

"I have been waiting! I have been waiting for this moment, master!"

"I wasn't trying to keep you waiting."

"Yet I was waiting! Now, master, it is time to regain your true power! Let us soar into the sky together and exterminate our enemies!"

"Understood. I have made up my mind now. And that determination has drawn out my power."

Akuto circled around to Peterhausen's side. The dragon had a saddle on his back. As Akuto tapped on that saddle, he made an announcement.

"Let me announce it once more: I will kill the gods."

And in that instant, Akuto became the demon king.

Peterhausen's cry of joy echoed sonorously through the underground area. The vibration caused the entire school building to shake.

"Let us go, master! When we fight together, no one can stop us!"

Peterhausen looked up to the ceiling and opened his jaws. A steel stake created within his body was fired from his mouth. That stake rotated at high speed and was carved into a spiral. It broke through the thick bedrock of the ceiling and caused a tremendous noise as it created a straight path to the surface.

The soldiers waiting on the surface exchanged glances as they wondered what was causing the roar coming from underground. But in the next instant, a giant stake appeared from below and shot earth and sand into the air. They cried out in surprise.

Even after breaking through the bedrock, the rotating stake kept its momentum and flew high into the sky. It then began to fall toward the ranks of troops.

"Get out of its way!" shouted someone.

The soldiers at the point it was falling at scattered in every direction. With a great roar, the stake crashed into the ground. A cloud of dust rose up and robbed the surrounding soldiers of their sight.

Every company commander was forced to raise their voice to prevent confusion.

“Return to your positions! Do not falter! Our enemies are nothing more than demonic beasts!”

But the shouts of the company commanders suddenly lost all momentum when those commanders themselves were left speechless.

Something with giant black wings flew up from the hole the stake had shot from.

Its shadow covered the soldiers and began freezing their hearts.

A legendary dragon had appeared before their eyes.

To them, this was the same as fear itself taking physical form.

A dark man riding a black dragon. Everyone who saw it began trembling and muttered the following words.

“It’s the demon king… The demon king is here…”

Afterword

Thank you as usual. This is Mizuki Shoutarou. Lately, I have been doing nothing but watch sports such as baseball and F1. And of course, I go the unhealthy route and watch it on TV. I think you should all play outside even during the winter. Come to think of it, I was once stranded in a graveyard only a few dozen meters from my house thanks to the snow. If I had died, I would have already been in my grave. Playing outside despite that kind of thing is just what men do.

Here is the fourth volume. Thanks to all of the readers, this is the series' first two-parter. This is also the very first one I have ever written. I am currently vigorously writing the next part. Whether this is your first novel in the series or you are back for more, please continue on with the next volume.

I apologize to those who are reading this at a later date, but as of December 2008, the manga version is serialized in Akita Shoten's Champion RED. It is being written by Itou Souichi-san himself. It is heading into some original events, so check it out even if you have already read the novels.

As for the plans other than the manga that I mentioned last volume, that is a CD drama that will be coming out. It should be released early next year.

The lead roles are played by Ono Daisuke-san and Nakahara Mai-san. The earliest place for new information such as the rest of the cast should be the website (http://www.hobbyjapan.co.jp/hjbunko/), so make sure to check there. I am waiting expectantly, too.

Now then, time for some pointless talk. I bought some cordless headphones recently and the right side produced only static. I went to the store to exchange it. The clerk said it was fine, but when I got home, it was still nothing but static. It was a cordless type, so it seems the problem was in the infrared transmitter. I didn't feel like going back to the store, so I hit the device as hard as I could and that fixed it. What era is this device from…? It still stops working sometimes, but I just have to hit it again to fix it. Then again, I'll probably completely break it one of these days.

Okay, now about the novel.

As usual, there is no need for explanation, but I think this volume would be a lot more interesting if you had read the previous volumes. Characters that appeared in Volume 2 but not Volume 3 show up too, so if you check back, I hope you will say something like “Oh, that’s right. That character was here.” Anyway, I hope anyone who started with this volume will pick up the previous ones as well. Having self contained stories is nice, but as the author, I feel a continuing series can be fun too. One of the joys of writing a series is to give a major role to a character that seemed to be very minor at first.

And I was only able to continue writing this thanks to all of your support, so I truly thank you.

I thank my illustrator, Itou Souichi-san. I am reading the manga every month. I am paying special attention to how it changes and evolves each chapter. It delights me that I will be able to read another chapter before long.

I thank my editor, Ohashi-san. Thank you even more than usual this time. I must cause you so much trouble every time. And I may have reached an age where I can’t pass it off as being inexperienced, but I believe I will still be able to improve my writing speed from now on. I personally feel very strongly that you should be able to give an answer when asked about your dreams for the future even after you pass thirty or forty. But that is also no excuse for leaving your dreams unfinished.

I also thank everyone else related to this novel. You have helped me out in so many ways.

Now then. We may have arrived at something like a climax, but this will continue well past the fifth volume. Do not worry. Let’s enjoy this together for a while longer!

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